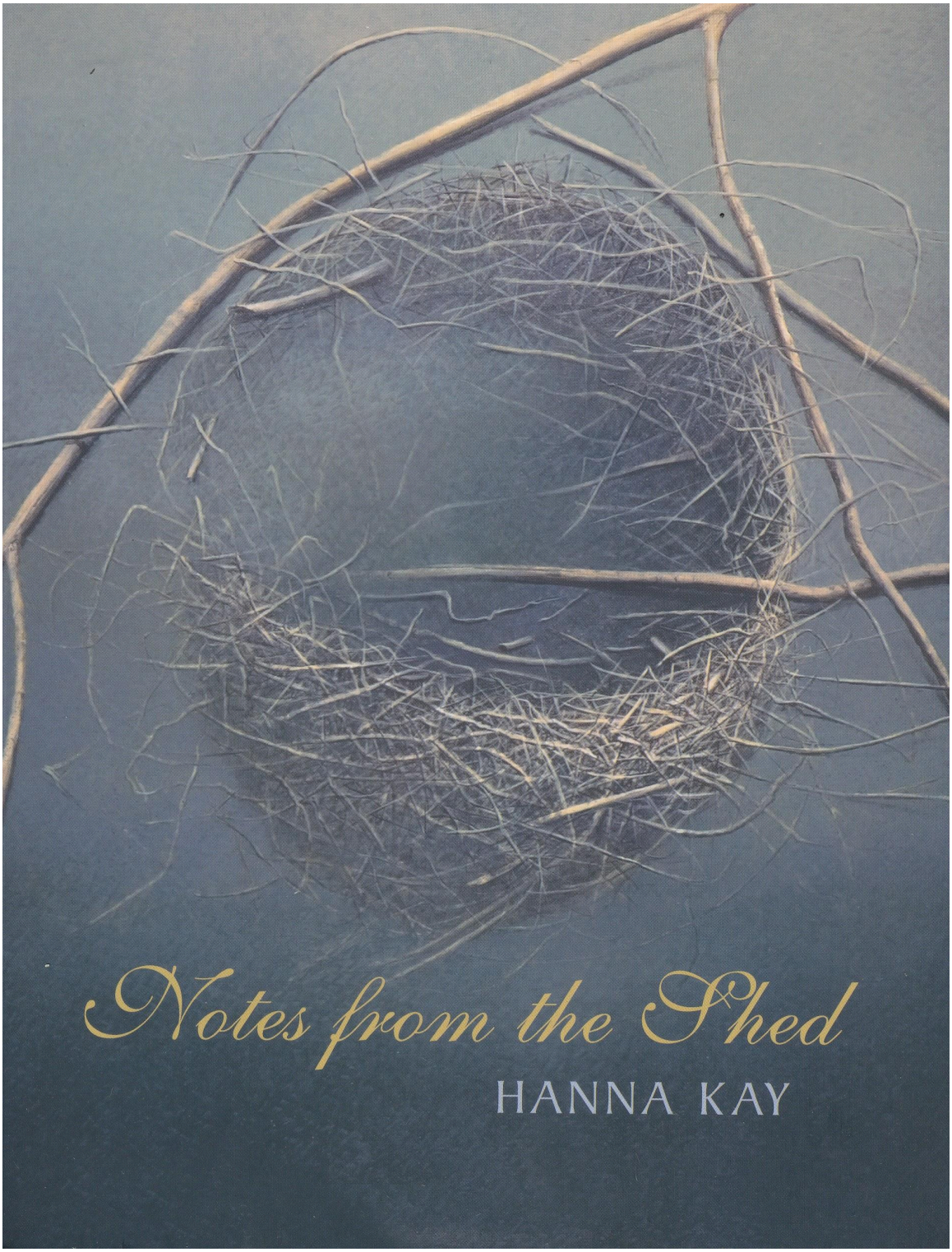
Notes from the Shed
HANNA KAY

NOTES FROM THE SHED

TO NATURE, WHILE SHE'S STILL AROUND

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Afterthought

This collection of journal entries began in January 2003. About a year later I was encouraged to assemble the writing into a book. I approached the task with uneasiness. An entry in a journal is meant to be as transient as a fleeting butterfly. It is a dialogue between one and oneself. To commit those same words to paper, and have them collect dust on bookshelves, is another matter altogether.

In all aspects of life, I live with an artist inside me. At times this person is intriguing, and at others – quite unbearable. Keeping a journal is like meeting this person inside me head-on. Writing is like confronting the issues that emerge while I am in the process of painting. Also, in a way I hope that words will help me understand the logic behind the urges that propel me to make art; urges over which I have no control.

While compiling this book, I found that there is a parallel between the changing seasons and the different phases of making art.

For instance, summer is about reaching fullness. Outside, in the valley, everything has attained its full potential. In the studio, I spend full days making and thinking art. Also, most of the writing I do in summer. In contrast, autumn is about summing up and preparations. Everything is preparing for winter - nature for its beauty sleep and people for the cold. In the studio, I put final touches on paintings, and usually prepare for coming exhibitions.

Winter is about hibernation. I call winter's dormant state an invigorating snooze. Outside the bare trees have opened the landscape, giving it another dimension. For me this combination of openness and inactivity invites inspiration. I spend hours watching the fire consuming the wood in the combustion stove. I read, and

go for long walks. And although the progress of paintings is noticeably slower I can sense new ideas brewing inside me.

Spring is about new growth, new sounds and new light. In the studio, the shift from winter to spring is subtle. I make lists of paintings I wish to create. Beginning of new paintings are scattered around. I watch carefully the movement of the brush, which is gaining momentum, as well as take cues from the marks it leaves on the canvas for future directions.

And when summer arrives, it usually does too fast, with my mind still waiting for winter.

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Summer

What conveys meaning is not the stone but the ripple it sends out.
Darryl Reanney, music of the mind

1.

One of the laws of perspective is that close by things appear to be larger than distant ones. Similarly, on a hot summer night, a frosty dawn seems to decrease its bite, and the biological surprises that follow the arrival of spring have by now become a faded memory.

The arrival of spring is always surprising. Its abruptness is breathtaking. One day the soil is frozen and unyielding and the next day the broccoli is going to seed. In contrast, the only way to notice the arrival of summer is to notice that everything has attained its full potential. The canopies of trees have filled in, there is an

abundance of eggs to collect in the chicken coop, and when an eagle plunges below the horizon, it seems to disappear into the depth of the valley.

For me, the fullness of summer declares itself in the studio, when I can spend uninterrupted days and nights, torturing myself in endless attempts to understand where I am going to with my work.

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The locals refer to my studio as “the shed”. For me the 200 square metres framed by iron-bark posts and corrugated iron, is a sanctuary in which I dare to experiment, question or be idle. The solid structure and the five acres that surround it protect me from the world’s follies.

Another suicide bomb in Tel Aviv. 25 killed. Bush is still threatening Iraq. And Korea is defiant. I look at my paintings and ask for the umpteenth time “what for? Why struggle? Does art make a difference?”
What is the place of a painting in a world where everything is reduced to electronic stimulus that contains superficial and fragmented information?

I only know that wrestling with images is my way of seeking sanity.

In the shed, just like a farmer who reshapes the soil according to her or his imagination, I create realities of sorts on stretched linen. Here I am free to merge space and form; to fuse time and the figure; to create without limitations (the boundaries of the canvas aside).

Producing the current body of work is testing - a slow process of inspirations and reservations. The nude and nature. Both have been exhausted as subjects of artistic endeavour. I am not that vain to believe that my way of painting the

female's form or the landscape will be an earth-shattering contribution to the world of art. Yet I continue to toil.

Faith keeps me going. Faith that one day I will understand the "whys"; that one day it will all make sense. By definition faith is an act of the imagination that allows us to accept that which cannot be proven, and my imagination is working overtime creating assurances.

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I count my doubts while swimming. Under the cold shower, in an anonymous cement block, I recall my reservations. On the drive back home they are temporarily forgotten. The mist has lifted off the ranges that cradle the little valley. The horses graze in the green fields. Just two weeks ago the fields were brown and dusty and the horses were hand fed. Today it is tropical lushness. I turn into our dirt road. Several cows are grazing in the neighbour's paddock. How bucolic!

I'm reminded of the first time we saw the place we now call home.

Early morning in mid October 1999, we drove out of Sydney, northbound. For some 300 km the road was meandering amidst woods, vineyard, lucerne fields, more woods, towns, small villages and for the last 30k it winded through the ascending Liverpool ranges. On entering our destination the highway dropped down to the Pages River revealing a tiny village cradled by the hills. We turned off the highway to a dirt road that ran parallel to the willow-lined river. A short distance and few bends away - the cottage! Behind it the paddock, in its midst a large stable shadowed by a lone majestic gum tree. Beyond the purple-green square making up the property was a brown sharp elevation of the ranges and beyond it the summit of Mount Murlow.

Drinking a cup of morning tea, I watch the mountain welcoming the day. The green slopes slowly come into view as the haze disappears. The Murlow has become a meditative focal point. I can watch it for hours. Void of thinking. Sometimes I imagine climbing it, with a camera, an apple, a bottle of tank water and Pessoa's Book of Disquiet hoisted on my back. Occasionally I stop the climb and look for myself watching the mountain.

I finish my tea; shake off one fantasy only to enter another.

I amble across the 100 metres path to the studio observing the young trees that define the boundaries of the 'estate'. Growing up in Israel, one's dreams were confined to a quarter acre. In Australia 5 acres does not a farm make, but in my vocabulary it is an 'estate'. And today the estate's fields are green. Just a couple of weeks ago they were shades of yellow and brown dotted by tired green/grey trees. Dust was everywhere. The dark soil was cracked. The trees' tenacity amazes me. Winter of heavy frosts. Spring of scorching temperatures. Summer of blazing heat. Underlining the change of seasons is the longest drought on record. Yet, we lost only a few of the young native trees we had planted.

Tolerance and patience - a lesson to be learned from indigenous species.

2.

While painting I don't think about what the work says. A painting of mine is not a statement, rather, it is a droplet in an infinite stream of artworks, some of which I will make while others will remain part of an imaginary necklace.

Around me are two or three, sometimes six or seven, paintings in different stages of completion. Each, with its own rhythm, each an adventurous journey of arranging, splattering and gathering. Splattering came along as a way of reducing the tedious layering of oil glazes. Not as automatic gestures (like the

surrealists), more like a Pollock-style attack on the canvas. For me, it is the most physical aspect in the process of painting; it is invigorating gymnastics. I wave a brush dripping with oil paint in the air and find the rhythm hidden in the canvas.

Splattering is also the stage in which I let go of controlling the image. It is the ‘wild’ phase between the structural and the considered. Next, I’d work to bring together the scattered marks from discord to accord; to find hints of the original structure and with measured brush strokes, will it into completion.

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I found two more pomegranate bushes that had sprouted. Five out of ten trees that we planted last winter had finally shown sign of life. The wooden sticks of the shrubs were covered with tiny green dots. Three months of relentless heat and no rain have been hard on the plants as well as on us. Last week’s rains have released some positive humid particles into the dry air. And now, our water tanks are over-flowing, the veggie garden is over productive and the pomegranate bushes that we had written off have sprouted into life.

It is my first drought on the land. Never before have I felt the burden of the possibility of no water. Growing up in Israel we were regularly reminded that every drop of water matters. We were conscious of its scarcity, yet it was taken for granted that when a tap was turned on water poured out.

Over the last year we have watched the water in the river dwindle. Every month we discovered a new water line engraved on the creek’s walls, and found that the roots of the casuarinas, exposed to the dry air, had changed colour and texture. I take the Nikon and record pink, black and lime green stripes on the edge of the bank and on exposed rocks. I enjoy the aesthetics, but I watch the watercress on the water’s surface in horror. The weeds edged around the river leaving thick carpets in their wake. Like a beast of prey on its hunt, the weeds await to overtake the next patch of clear water.

All of a sudden the ants are busier than usual. They hurry up and down rocks and branches, carrying scraps of stuff to their holes in the ground. A turtle crosses the road towards the river. The frogs are noisy. The native trees have new shoots - silvery tiny leaves swaying with the breeze. “Signs of rain to come” says the only aborigine left in town, who reads the terrain as I read a newspaper. He explains that the trees could sense the humidity in the air much before any human instrument could. According to him if I’d place my ear next to a tree trunk I could hear particles rushing upward. But, I could hear only the magpie singing on a nearby branch.

Indeed, a few days later it rained

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Talks of war slice through the thickness of our idyllic curtain. I retreat to the security of my palette, to the comfort of the colours. However my mind has drifted back to a time, covered by images of sand, which I’d rather not remember. Unclaimed bodies. Retreating Egyptian soldiers. Myself, a soldier in a conquering army chasing receding dunes in the Sinai desert. We stopped behind a large truck. A cloud of flies lingering above. I welcomed the light breeze that eased the heat and carried away the flies, only to reveal the load of dead Egyptian soldiers piled on top of each other.

In war, there are no winners.

I have to admit that I have never lost the particular consciousness that makes me Jewish and Israeli. The moments I wish to forget catch up with me. By and large my memories are unattractive. My heritage is saturated with blood. I don’t want to recall, or to remember, but I cannot stop memories from rushing in. What's more,

this heritage feeds my artworks. The experiences in the Sinai desert decades ago have both propelled and driven my creative ambitions.

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Few drops have just landed on the studio's tin roof. A storm is lurking in the distance. Like everybody else in the bush I wish for rain; for an end to the unbearable heat. Despite the green pastures, we are still in a state of drought. The river is flowing again, but its stream has been reduced to a trickle.

A false promise. The sun is back, tinting the mountains a golden glow. Dusk leisurely takes over the last rays of sunshine. In the rabbit-proof vegetable garden I look in despair at small patches of thirsty ground between the gigantic zucchinis and the sprawling tomato bushes. A month ago I could still read my aspirations in the veggie patch. Now I gather both successes and disappointments in the wreck. A month ago - a weed-free garden (the only delight in a drought), today some weeds are taller than the chilli plants.

When we first planted vegetables, it rained all spring. Most of the plants rotted. Miserably I looked at the tomatoes, the beans and the green peppers decaying on the ground. Never again. Farming is definitely not for me. However, the corn, which loves lots of water, survived. The taste of home-grown corn sent me back to the veggie patch armed with seeds and new seedlings.

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While mourning the grevilleas that did not survive, I make lists of plants that could grow in rich soil and heavy frosts. By mid-morning, the list of plants is much too long for our bank account. Leaving practicality behind, I walk to the studio envisioning - a native bush outlining the 'estate'; water-lilies dotted pond framed by silver birches and weeping grasses, and a forest of deciduous trees whose colourful autumn leaves will contrast with the colourless gum trees.

4.

In each drop of rain, my failed life weeps in nature. There is something of my disquiet in the drop-by-drop with which the sadness of the day pours itself uselessly over the earth.

F. Pessoa, The Book of Disquiet

I open Pessoa's Book randomly and read a few paragraphs by the tormented Portuguese poet. His melancholy does not echo in the life I lead today, yet it resonates with familiarity. His words are marked by urban experiences. Sometimes isolation and banality can be felt more profoundly in crowded cities than in the midst of a paddock or the bush. Lisbon provided Pessoa with a framework for his narrative of an agonized self. New York played a similar role in my angst-ridden road to 'enlightenment'. There each drop of rain contained something of my disquiet, and I struggled to find a language that would express it. There I also believed that since language is the means by which we think, we are alienated from ourselves by the same medium we use to understand ourselves. Then and now, with Pessoa, I believe that there is an abyss between words and meaning.

Every New Year I open my journal and write about the need to keep a journal. Every New Year I resolve to record day by day a fragment of thought, an observation, a reflection, a sketch – to be the anthropologist of my own life. I keep at it for a few pages and then life takes over. The current black book in which I keep my journal is mostly blank. I have written ten new beginnings over ten years, all of which are repetitive and fragmented descriptions of an ongoing creative struggle.

Yet, an unexplained urge conspires against the brush. I get a pen and a blank page and begin to introspect. A few paragraphs later the inspiration would shift

direction and I go back to painting and drawing. It seems that a certain primal need to move pen on paper propels me. To make marks. Words. Images.

This year I did not summarize the fading year; neither did I attempt to outline my wishes for the next year. This year I hoped to recognize the paintings and drawings I made from the writings. Instead, I found myself describing king parrots and kookaburras in the paddock at dusk. Rather than recounting yet again the pain of giving birth to a painting, I wanted to celebrate the chooks and the homegrown tomatoes. I wanted to write about the rainless storms that, like fireworks, light hot summer nights, and about the birth of a foal at the neighbouring stud. I wanted to nurture my memory of the changing seasons.

Unlike winter, when the light is forever changing, this time of the year is an expanse of sunshine, briefly interrupted by storms that clear the heavy air. This morning, dark clouds carrying a promise of a good downpour were gathering behind the Murlow. I took the dogs and set out to explore the river, aware of an urgent need to have the sound of water as a background for thinking. Feeling my thoughts and listening to my feelings is an essential part in clearing out barriers that hold back the creative itch. I descended into the river and followed the causeway. The water again stopped flowing over the rocks. Duckweeds and watercress yet again took over the riverbed. We walked along the river shaded by Casuarinas and Willows from the last rays of sun.

I found the exact rock where I wanted to sit, a place where the river bends and the gully is deeper. Rocks, roots, water and dark clouds surrounded me. I took off my clothes and joined the dogs in the cold water. We puddled along until I started warming up and my muscles relaxed. I went back to the rock and let the warm air dry my exposed body. The water flowed around my feet creating patterns that shimmered in the diluted sun light.

I named the painting I'm currently working on 'the memory of water'. The canvas is divided to three: on the right, a reflection of two women; in the middle section – a woman (from neck down) sitting in the sand; and on the left - marks left by ebbing water. None of the parts is resolved. I find water difficult to paint. I must change attitude. I need new tricks. To be able to paint water is to think about colour rather than about shape. Usually, when painting, I consider the source of light and its effects. Now I need to think in terms of fragmented colours and broken patterns.

Down at the river the water tickles my ankles. I want to outline a square of shimmering little ovals on the moving surface; to wrap it with my shirt; to hide it in my pocket. And in the studio I'd place it in a closed jar on a shelf in the cabinet where I put other objects collected on field excursions.

A noisy family of ducks scared the dogs and disturbed the writing on the water. I hurried back stumbling upon rocks and shallow puddles. By the time we climbed the riverbank the wind had picked up, clearing the clouds away to reveal hazy blue sky. Another of nature's broken promises.

Back in the studio I am not sure what the urgency was about. The painting does not look too bad. I place an orange stone I picked up in the river among the bits and pieces in the green cedar cabinet.

5.

An unseasonably cold Sunday. Only the beginning of January and it feels like autumn. The flora and fauna are confused. I would not be surprised if the deciduous trees will exhibit their magnificent display of autumn colours in a couple of weeks. There are no flocks of galahs in or around the paddock. Last year at this time hundreds of birds turned the paddock pink in search for seeds. This year, there are no yellow-crested cockatoos roosting in the gum tree, and no

assemblies of king parrots or rosellas to count. Even our resident kookaburras are absent.

The routine of living in four seasons is reassuring. It is comforting to know that autumn follows summer, which follows spring, which follows winter. I take pleasure in putting away winter clothes, and airing summer cotton blankets. Living in an infinite plane of time could be disconcerting. Vivaldi's music, Keats' poem and Japanese paintings represent the idea of seasons we all so cherish and celebrate. However, in reality the divide is not that clear– in summer, days of unseasonable coolness come along after an unprecedented heat wave. In the northern part of the continent, there are only the dry and the wet. Here it is the dry, the wet, the muddy and the dusty.

From where I stand the yellow cottage seems to have developed a shimmering pink aura around it. As if overnight the bottlebrushes, the grevilleas and the butterfly shrubs have teamed up to display their delicate flowers in arrays of pinks and reds. Slowly everything we had planted is making itself at home and we reap the benefits.

The dahlias, the cosmos, the Mexican sunflowers and the rest of the flowers I planted when the last frost was a memory, have shown amazing resilience. They have survived the rabbits, the scratching of the chicken, the dogs, the drought and Leslie's vigorous gardening habits. Now they are in full bloom around the studio. But do I really want to count them? Who am I kidding? I look at the flowers but think of Jared Diamond's talk about why certain old civilizations ceased to exist.

Our valley is not immune from other people's problems. Communication and high tech make sure we are notified of any calamity that befalls even the most remote place on the planet. Instant news is served with dinner, and we believe that by breakfast technology will solve the unpalatable crisis. Jared Diamond spoke

about the rich who attempted to insulate themselves from the consequences of their actions. In LA they built high walls around their estates and drunk only bottled water. They were surprised to realize that globalization was a two-way street – export Internet, coca-cola and MacDonalds; import terrorism, cholera and uncontrollable immigration.

Few months ago Itzik told me that he was optimistic. The situation in Israel could not get any worse. Unfortunately, it has. When I look back at my homeland I don't like what I see. A warring nation, her identity shaped by hatred. Long before Egypt, Syria, Jordan and the Palestinians there were Germany, Russia, Spain, Rome, Greece, Babylon and the Pharaohs. Judaism has survived in spite of the many campaigns against it. What's more, destruction and exile have become not just components of Jewish history; they are a component of the culture itself. External events have helped shape the contemporary Israeli consciousness, but internal brawls and feuds might after all destroy the previously indestructible Jewish optimism.

6.

On the estate, it is easy to believe that the wild and untamed are lurking in the back yard. I was going to write 'wilderness', but in Australia the word has a different meaning to that of Europe or America. Over there 'wilderness' means lush forests teaming with life and mystery – the place where fairy tales take place. Here it stands for aridity and wasteland. It is the place where harsh realities confront you head on.

All my life I lived with city hum as a backdrop for my dreams, and now the sound of silence has taken over. At first light the kookaburras' laugh woke me up. For a moment, I savoured a fleeting dream. But an unidentified howl followed by the rooster's call shattered any hopes of falling back asleep.

Few nights ago I was kept awake by Mishka's whines. I was too lazy to leave the comfort of the bed, and was sure that a sprained ankle or a thorn in her paw could wait untill daybreak. Both Leslie and I were dumbfounded to find that all night the poor dog was trying to tell us that she had an Echidna in her bed. A large Echidna made itself comfortable next to Mishka's bed in the outside laundry. Leslie went as far as accusing her of bringing it home as a playmate. But he had to apologize after he was forced to use gloves and a wheelbarrow to remove the heavy creature, who had clung to the cement floor.

Yesterday afternoon I came out of the studio to face a fox eyeing the chickens who were scratching in the paddock. The goats stopped in their stride. Sensing something was amiss, the chooks froze in mid scratch. Everything stood still. The fox looked at me cunningly. Took a few decisive steps towards the frightened creatures, and then had a change of heart - turned around and in a flash escaped behind the eastern fence. It was a moment of misdemeanour. In my book foxes should appear only at night.

A fox had already killed five of our chickens. Since then, we secured the chicken-coup, and we have come to believe that the dogs were chasing it away. We hated losing the chickens, and we hated the fox for killing them. Perhaps less if hunger had motivated the killing…But the dead chickens were left intact in the chook yard for us to clean the mess. It was not the conventional hatred, a part we know how to perform. There are no stories in which the fox, a few metres away, looks at you in the middle of the afternoon considering his next move. Traditionally, unless you are in a fairy tale, the fox keeps its distance, respecting the invisible boundaries between the wild and the not wild. But yesterday afternoon the fox ignored these boundaries and shattered my juvenile trust in daylight.

Watching the rising sun illuminating the dark silhouettes of the mountains and trees, my thoughts wandered to the blank canvases in the studio. Somehow, it felt as if I was keeping the images at a distance from myself.

Later that day, instead of unearthing the elusive images, I sit in my favourite reading spot in the studio, and look at the sudden gathering of an afternoon wind. The rains we had few weeks ago are by now a distant memory. Dust rises from the dogs' paws when they run across the yard. The rooster and his ladies dust themselves in puddles of dry soil. Menacing clouds approach from the west, from behind the Murlow, from where the weather comes. The wind is scattering the sunflowers petals. Young trees bend towards the east, almost touching the dry earth. The sky is leaden. Any moment the rain will begin. But then, as suddenly as it begun, the wind stops. Over the Murlow, a patch of blue sky. Few drops fall, enough to remind me that the smell of rain is the smell of wet dogs.

7.

Twenty-four hours to make a day, and at the end of the day you discover that it was not worthwhile, and the following day is the same all over again, if only we could leap over all the futile weeks in order to live one hour of fulfilment, one moment of splendour, if splendour can last that long.

J. Saramago, The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis

Today, when the only two paintings I have completed in the last two months left for Sydney. I wish, with Saramago, that I could link together the futile weeks.

Were these weeks indeed futile?
Do the endless dialogues between me and myself about meaning, consequence and significance lead anywhere?

Me: the work is extremely personal.

Myself: yes
Me: too personal is too idiosyncratic.
Myself: But, expressions of the personal could touch the suprapersonal.
Me: where does this word come from?
Myself: probably read it somewhere. Art can challenge conventions!
Me: intentions do not always make themselves known in paintings.
Myself: they might if you write a rationale.
Me: if I could write I would not paint.
Myself: but you do write.
Me: not what I paint.

To end this, I shut my eyes tight, as small children do in an attempt to look invisible. Neither of us has vanished.

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Chet Baker's melancholic voice penetrates the night. He sings, "I mortgage my castles in the air". The line resonates with shattered hopes. I like the wording. I collect sentences. I write them down on scraps of paper, on empty pages in books, in my blank black books, on the back of bookmarks. It is like taking photographs: while looking through the lens and framing the scene, the image registers somewhere, stored till unconsciously I find use for it. From time to time, on cold winter nights or on very hot afternoons, I go through my photographs and recognize how many of them had served unwittingly as reference for my artwork. In contrast, the sentences I collect stay chaotic on shelves and in drawers. Perhaps they are unwittingly incorporated in the things I write or say.

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The scorching heat is back. The blue and red king parrots are back, busy looking for seeds under the Judas tree. Another pomegranate tree is sprouting. The paddocks are turning yellow and brown.

In the studio I must move, otherwise the spiders will seize the opportunity to use even my body as a hook for their webs. A large lizard lives in the studio. I call it Eric. He is pretty. White, black and brown stripes. In the morning when I enter, I can see Eric running for cover under the couch. It is fear of Mishka not me. At times, just next to where I sit, he devours a moth completely oblivious to my presence. At night, he roams the dark space, familiar with every groove, bump and nail in the smooth wooden floor. He leaves his mark on my desk, just next to the keyboard.

This summer, as in the previous two, I have been stung and pricked by nettles, thistles and thorns. My hands have lost sensitivity, though not that insensitive - I can definitely feel the next splinter that penetrates my soiled fingers. Again and again I forget to wear gloves. In fact, I don't really forget. I don't like them. I enter the veggie patch, planning to pick some strawberries for breakfast. I don't intend to pull out any weeds, or carry rough pieces of wood. But in the soft morning light, the shimmering dew reveals new and old weeds. I pluck a few. Carefully. To avoid the stinging leaves of the nettle I go for the stem next to the ground. Sometimes it works, and I feel victorious. I have outwitted nature. But more often then not I get stung.

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Any surface, devoid of colour as it may be, teems with the activity of colliding colours. Unlike other artists who get a buzz from primary colours, I get a kick out of greys. I mix lots of different colours into grey. I love creating greys with just a nuance of pink, yellow, or purple, which set up vibrations on the composed forms.

I enjoy painting nude women. I take pleasure in discovering how to relate body to soil. For hours I watch the canvas on which the paint has no reason. The marks I made the day before make no sense. Nevertheless, slowly slowly, shapes reveal themselves and a coherent image is brought into light.

A woman painting the female nude is nothing like a man painting the female nude. For both it is an exploration of an organic-sensual form. However, arguably, for men painting the female body is an expression of desire, lust and a wish to possess. On the other hand, for a woman, it is a celebration of self. Oddly, it allows the woman a kind of detached engagement with the subject.

But why paint the nude in the 21st century?
To capture the way skin reflects light?
To render the way form moulds light?

I am bewildered myself. My concerns as an artist have been to probe traces of kind. Painting the nude is an exploration of substance rather than absence.

I resist the urge to look for explanations.

8.

Focusing on the elements, the changing light and the behaviour of the fauna and flora is my way of avoiding thinking about the impending war in Iraq and by extension in Israel.

It is bush fire season. Fire is raging around Canberra. Flames have devoured more than 500 homes. Fire and drought go together as flood and disease. Our disregard for the environment has led us to uncharted territories: the driest drought on record; the longest succession of record hot temperatures; the longest succession of record cold temperature. The voice of scientists is silenced

by the sound of exploding bombs. Politicians overstate danger of aliens and distant lands, but understate danger of alienation from our own land.

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The painting on the easel looks seductive.
I read what Heather wrote about the two “body and soil” paintings I completed:

… The tenderness is new and the willingness to let the female in so fully. I love that quality. I do have questions though and I want to share them with you. I sense that the woman is symbolic of feeling. Nature exists whether we are there or not. Nature does not care. We care. So I am wondering why you feel the need to construct boxes for the human, especially female? Why not let rip with the tenderness that the woman in her relaxed beauty expresses? Why use isolating rectangles to separate her?
To me the boxes seem more like exercises or devices than intrinsic structures. I don’t know why they are there except as a possible threshold for engaging with post-modernism in its fragmentation, or as an intellectual play with loose notions of geometry. And to me the work has the potential to go way beyond that dialogue. I think the tenderness is absolutely wonderful. An awakening. And I don’t feel the need to see it protected or isolated in any way, cerebral or otherwise.

I don’t have answers to her questions. The boxes were a solution for a previous attempt to deal with a ‘sense of place’. The female body has somehow inserted herself into one of the boxes. No reasoning. A sudden urge.

By the time I received her letter I had already discarded the boxes. First, because it was a game. Just like any other post-modern discourse, aesthetic exercises for their own sake are extremely tedious. Second, she was correct in talking about isolation. My current preoccupation is about finding the median between the

inclusive and the exclusive; the macro and the micro; the vista and the segment; the minimal and the maximal. Dividing the canvas to suggest an intellectual correlation between the segments simply did not work.

The current process is a search for subtle beauties.
Last night I dreamed a painting - a very large white canvas with a beautifully rendered small figure in the upper left corner. I cling to the feeling it gave me.

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In the Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, as in any exhibition of this kind, some artists were better than others. It was interesting to see how westernized Asian artists had become. It seems that artists appropriate styles from others to give their work more validity. Picasso did it by appropriating primitive African styles. Australian artists do it, by appropriating aboriginal styles. Asian artists do it by appropriating Western styles.

Is it because it is difficult to penetrate one's own culture?
Or is it just a case of a fantasy about the authenticity of the 'other'?

On the way back I went for a long walk on the beach at Byron Bay. Salty smell, sticky air, children were building sand castles just where the water engraved its presence on the sand. I remembered myself, as a child building sand castles. I could just about feel the wet sand dripping between my fingers. I could just about see the fascinating forms it created upon drying. I could just about hear the gentle waves breaking on the sand. And I could just about touch the delicate mark the water had left on the wet sand.

In the town I went window-shopping. Buying clothes and shoes is a childish pleasure I inherited from my mother. When I grew up, there was never enough money. At nightfall, we would go window shopping, looked at the displays of

expensive shops, where she'd get ideas for the dresses she would make. At day time, she'd bargain at the fabric shop and would leave victorious. We used to receive clothes and other luxury items from my aunt and cousins in America. Our greatest excitement was the coming of the parcels with the foreign stamps and characters. They contained gifts, which were symbols of an out of reach world – a sophisticated world to which I longed to belong.

*

I write to Heather:

Subject: Desperation:

dearest heather,

i am speechless.
the talk of war; the state of the environment, and by extension the world's natural disasters - the weather, the drought, the fires and Sharon's crushing victory.

The drought and the heat have settled in. The paint dries on the brush before it reaches the canvas, and my wrist sticks to the paper when I draw. I installed an air conditioner in the studio which means - I have no excuses. So in desperation I sit across from the cool air, and let the pen glide over the paper. I prepared about 40 pieces for small drawings. The first 12 are of women of three different generations, all in similar postures.

While writing these words it has occurred to me that having lost my hopeless optimism, I am a freer artist. Having abandoned the belief that art can bring about change, I'll stick to providing an alternative outlook. I think I am ready to paint just for the sake of painting; to draw for the sake of the line.

Although I had a refreshing time at Byron Bay, I'm exhausted. The desperation. The sweltering heat. I have let go of the garden. I feel guilty watering when the rest of the country is either thirsty or going up in flames. The only concession I make is watering the veggie garden every fourth day.

I gather the harvest, which is still in abundance. By now the veggie garden is a concoction of vines and stalks; of sweet corn, cucumbers, tomatoes, capsicums, zucchinis, grapes and melons. The vegetable garden has lost it's romantic look it had in spring. Bristle leaves and dried stems are everywhere I look. Tall weeds do not let go of the ground as I pull.

Byron was hot, sticky and full of tourists. And so was Brisbane. Being there vindicated my feeling against living by the coast. The salt penetrates the bones. The humidity melts the brain. The show in Brisbane confirmed my conviction that artists who paint and draw are endangered species. I might have sound enthusiastic over the phone. If I did, it was not thanks to any artwork I saw. Yet, I was pleased I went to see the exhibition.

I guess I'm off to the studio. I can hear the wind playing the chimes in the garden. The breeze is cool and soothing here on the 'grand chalet'. The trees turn silver while their leaves rattle in the slight breeze. But I cannot help thinking how devastating this wind will be for the towns that are threatened by the fires.

Love, hanna

In response she wrote:

my dear HANNA,

…I lost myself in [your words] and it took time for me to go down into the darkness that you wrote of. underneath all your sorrow and despair and loss-of-innocence re: art and its value, i found another message in your writing. offering an alternative. i really think THAT is deeply optimistic. it may not change the World, but it gives glimpses of light. of beauty. of feeling. of time. of human duration. and it goes against the speed of destructive urges ands forces.

so, keep trust with yourself in your studio. keep the a/c on. keep the pencils sharpened and the oils smooth. keep surprising yourself with your steps. and do not for one moment give in to the World Grief that would immobilize the abilities you have to express your

love of life. I know you won't anyway. it is not possible, as long as you can see and feel and use your hands, you will paint and draw your way towards, I was going to say bliss or at least happiness, but no, not that in these times, rather towards something larger than yourself. That will do.

where can we put our anger anyway? what are we going to do, assassinate Bush? give Howard an apron? tell Saddam Hussein to extinguish himself for the good of the people? arrange a jousting match, horns for horns, between Sharon and Arafat? drown Indonesia? camouflage Zimbabwe? everywhere we look, the world is on a dangerous brink. not to mention cloning, genetic manipulating, mind and body altering experiments, drugs, shoppers till they droppers, capitalism, communism, millionaires, paupers, droughts, fires, floods, volcanic eruptions, animal extinctions, pollutions, perversions, and on and on and on.

we MUST create as best we can. for our own duration. we must try to sleep at night, be wakeful during the day. give and receive love in the details. and be open to hope.

this is totally inadequate. eventually i will say-it-better. for now i just want to say, to you and to myself, carry on.

with much love, Heather.
Melbourne

*

The last dormant pomegranate has sprouted.

The dogs are restless. I hear unsettling neighs coming from the horse stud. A dry muted thump. Thunder in the distance. One moment there is stillness. The next moment the wind picks up and scatters white rose petals on the dusty yard. The sky is the colour of lead and I can almost smell the rain. I can hear a distant thump. With renewed energy I shut windows and am ready to welcome the downpour. It has gone this way for several months - dense clouds, a strong wind which blows the promise of rain and blue sky returns over the Murlow.

Not today.
It finally rains.

9.

It's almost shocking to admit but I am ready for autumn. I usually begin grieving summer on its solstice, December 22nd, when the rooster chases his ladies back to their coop earlier - each day a minute earlier. I grieve for the fading of long warm evenings; the end of plenty in the orchard; the last of both afternoon swims in the river, and stargazing just before retiring to bed. But not this year. The heat has drained every drop of summer enthusiasm. I wilt with the flowers. Deprivation has settled into my bones.

The drought.
The looming coal mine on our doorsteps.
The talk of war.
Frustrated and enraged I write a letter to the local papers.

One man's progress is another's regression.
In the town of Murrurundi, for some, the idea of the coming of a coal mine to the neighbourhood is progress - jobs and dollars injection into the local economy. For others it is a step backwards and represents irreversible damage to the local economic, cultural and physical environment.

Holding the latter view, I would like to point out:

The Kyoto agreement, which Australia refuses to ratify, is going to make an impact on the way we look at energy resources, and the way we do business. One needs only to follow the R&D of alternative energy around the world, and its ever-growing implementation to realise that, sooner than later, burning coal is going to be a thing of the past.

John Hewson, who is far from being considered a 'greeny', advocates ratifying the agreement (even if it is only to benefit the business community). Whether Australia goes that way or not, time will tell. Meanwhile, approval of a coal mine in our backyard is definitely a short sighted step. It might well inject a few dollars into the economy for a limited period, but it will not only destroy a beautiful physical environment, but also the efforts of the residents and councils to make the Upper Hunter a wonderful and lucrative place to live.

It takes time to establish a vineyard or an olive grove. It takes pain and patience to raise cattle and breed horses. The Upper Hunter is known for its diverse enterprises all of which have their good and bad seasons. A coalmine in the proposed area will scar not only the landscape, but also the hard working people whose livelihood depends on clean water and coal dust-free air. Long after the coalmine ceases operation, we will still have to live with the scars.

Ironically, since I came to live here, I have become politically active. I moved away from the city for the tranquillity. However, peace of mind in the bush seems to be a fallacy. Perhaps because the impact of the civilized world on nature is more noticeable. Perhaps because the confrontation between progress and conservation, change and preservation are both a matter of survival.

On Earth Beat (Radio National), they were discussing writing about nature, and whether art could change people's attitudes towards the world they live in. Politics is part of what makes us. It is impossible for artists not to get involved or speak their mind. Artworks allow the viewer to engage with the imagination, and perhaps instigate a new way of seeing parts of their world. According to the voice on the radio, artists who open such windows could change things in the world.

Yesterday, an American scientist revealed that Bush had placed nuclear warheads among the weapons of possible use. It sounded like a bad script for a B grade Hollywood movie. I wish it were. Angry and sad, yet I do nothing. The

sight of thousands marching around the world for peace moves me to tears. So do those in Europe who board the hundreds of busses on route to Baghdad to stop the war. All I seem to be able to do is paint and swim feverishly. Almost as if my paintings will outdo political insanity and my breaststroking arms will disperse the troops; almost as if, pulling the weeds will make Bush, Blair and Howard fade away like a bad dream.

I am envious of Sebald's ability to fuse the everyday with the imagined. In 'The Rings of Saturn' he writes about the "paralyzing horror" that overtakes the hero in the face of the destruction of the landscape in England. The towns and landscapes through which he moves are ghost-ridden, layered with the past. His gloom is about the destruction of habitat in the name of progress. Yet, he is not a conservative who longs for a past golden age. Sebald refers to the year 1914 as the year when Europe took the wrong turn.

Would the year 2003 be remembered as the year when the Western world took a wrong turn?

If we view ourselves from a great height, it is frightening to realize how little we know about our species, our purpose and our end.

Sebald.

This morning I noticed that I was going for a swim. It sounds like a strange thing to notice since I do it almost every day. Usually, my mind is already in the pool counting laps, or contemplating the outrageous proposition of a coalmine in this beautiful valley. Today I was thinking about the looming catastrophe in the Middle East. Upon arriving in town, a ute was entering the road from a driveway. The driver, smiling, waved the typical rural salute. It was the ranger who maintains the swimming pool. He recognised my car before seeing me. He knows my routine - my repetitions.

What I was really noticing this morning is those repetitions. Having lived in several different places, I often wonder what it would be like to live your life in just one place. It would mean, among other things, a degree of repetition I can hardly imagine, and with it an awareness of the subtlety of change. Since we moved to the valley, I have marvelled daily at where we are and how we live. Many times when I walk to the studio I feel as if I hover beside myself like a hawk. Everything is both familiar and mystifying. Then my mind wanders to the likes of Wendy and Manne, who have lived only in this town, and so did generations of their ancestors.
How do they dream, reflect and contemplate the trajectory of their lives?
Can they see themselves from a bird's point of view?

This is something I'll never know.

In fact, living in the same place all their life may well protect them from a sense of alienation that comes from having a bird's perspective.

10.

Whatever we seek, we seek out of ambition, but either we do not achieve that ambition, in which case we are poor, or we judge we have attained it, in which case we are rich fools.

Fernando Pessoa

A suitable quote for a day in which ambitions run high and stupidity celebrates her domination. The leaders of the free world are just like cowboys riding into a sun that has set on common sense. I direct the anger towards the weeds. I pluck and rip pigweeds and cat eyes. I prune dead brunches and pull out zucchini plants covered with fungi.

It is easy to forgo anger and pain in the garden.

It is also easier to write about the poor weeds, the retracting daylight, the glittering morning dew, or the gathering evening breeze that gets behind my ears when I pick cucumbers, than to write about the disturbing events. It takes no efforts to stay synchronized with the changing season and its effect on the 'estate'. But it takes all my imagination to live in step with the world outside the gate.

Even the sale of five paintings does not sooth the anger. In fact it exasperates my anxiety – nothing of the summer's toil is left in the studio. No body no soil. And, I did not join the thousands who demonstrated against the war.

*

It has been raining all day. Some say it is the end of the drought. I can hear the earth gulping every raindrop. I can see the trees stretching their arms and the leaves anointing their silvery skin with the precious liquid. There is renewed energy in the air. Sagginess has been washed away.

The banyan-pine I planted yesterday looks cheerful. Good timing. Perhaps tomorrow we'll plant some of the cuttings that have struck roots. My favourite gardening activity – to place a cutting in a mixture of river sand and peat moss and wait for it to strike roots. A few weeks later, I dig out the cutting whose roots cling to the polystyrene box, and place it in a pot. By now I have potted scores of cuttings, which are ready to go into the ground. But the earth is hard, it has been impossible to dig a hole. Perhaps after today's rain the soil will yield to the trowel and the root-bound plants will get their final rest.

The earth feels like a soft carpet under my gumboots. Nature's resilience does not cease to amaze me. Frostbitten newly planted gum trees, which we wrote off as dead, shoot up in the spring. Sun burnt bottlebrushes that we considered

gone, come back to life in autumn. And now the brown paddock has turned bright green over night.

The locals reckon you become one of them after at least 15 years in the area. I believe you become a local when you stop being amazed by what you see when you step outdoors. Late one evening last week I was introduced to the great-orb-weaving-spider. The web, luminous in the moon light, hovered about two metres above the path to the studio. It stretched between the wattle and a young gum tree about six meters apart. A large spider in the centre of a delicate orb waited for her victims.

Did she make a giant leap?
Apparently she hooks her thread to one treetop; walks down and over to the other tree. Climbs up to the next treetop and stretches the thread between the two trees. The suspended thin line becomes the foundation of the web. Next she walks over to the middle and begins weaving delicate threads into an intricate design. In the morning she is gone. Unlike other spiders that can usually be seen pottering around, repairing their web, she starts all over again every evening. Last night, on the way back from the studio, I got entangled in her web. Sticky threads all over me. Than I felt a movement in my hair.

Did she notice my routine and lower the height of her web to capture me?

On the fridge we hung a spider chart. The blurb says that the orb-weaving-spider is relatively harmless and quite beneficial. And so is the huntsman. But lots of things can happen to your heart when a great-orb is crawling in your hair, or when a large huntsman, hiding behind the sunshade in the car, drops onto your lap while driving.

And then there are the colourful dragonflies. They fly between the house and the studio, punctuating the path with turquoise and red speckles. Their translucent

wings reflect the rays of sun. All day long, back and forth, they fly above the black thick rubber sheets that make the path, searching for insects. They even mate in-flight believing the dark winding trail to be a river.

Will I ever stop being amazed?

*

The vegetable garden is chaotic. Helplessly I look at the network of climbers and stalks. The tomato vines have wound their way into the raspberry bush. The cucumber plants have clutched the potatoes, and the snake beans are entangled in the grape vines. The melons have made their way into the strawberry patch, and the zucchini's large leaves are shading the red peppers. All intertwine, creating a surreal structure of sprawling and clutching. The corn is ready to be harvested. Gigantic forgotten cucumbers are hiding among the rows of the tall stalks. The coriander, parsley, and dill have all gone to seed.

It overwhelms me. Our deep freezer is full with Leslie's pesto and my ratatouille. Since the garden is not the least bit charming, I look forwards to covering the soil with fresh straw, and then waiting for spring when I will start all over again. Yet I know that there are several months of plenty ahead. I should clear bristly vines and give them to the goats. I should cut off the tips of basil. I should pick grapes before the birds get them. I should attend to over-ripe tomatoes that lie shamefully on the ground. I should get rid of yellowing leaves and dried stems. I should weed. I should…

But by now I feel time is precious. Even writing seems like an indulgence. I am committed to several exhibitions and must stay next to the easel. When I think of the art I want to make, an overpowering sense of incapacity engulfs me, a strange sense of powerlessness in the face of my intentions. It is a new

sensation, which has nothing to do with dexterity, but rather with the management of time.

11.

The sound of Jan Garbarek's sax saturates the studio.

Only traces of summer are left to be registered. It is the last week of summer yet the heat shows no indication of letting go. Again, when the heat is unbearable I find myself longing for words. There are times when I hold on to words like a woman drowning, hoping that the rumbling of words will pave a path back to the easel. I choose carefully the word I cling to. I poke in a mass of melted vocabulary, looking for a meaningful sequence to secure around the waist so that I float. It is so easy to get carried away with combinations of words for their aesthetic quality; to compose phrases because they sound or look attractive.

At other times, I might use monotonous motions of a brush and emulate the rhythm of the music. I think about this process as means rather than work. Somehow I believe that the repetitive movements of the brush or pencil will sort out my precarious state. During those times, when I am not sure how to put one foot in front of the other, I believe that somehow I'd paint my way into being an inspired person.

Garbarek is followed by Anouar Braham's Thimar and Zakir Hussein's Making Music. I press the repeat button. It is my preferred music for hot summer days. For the rest of the day I let the music prop the moving hand, stopping only when the light promises a spectacle at sunset.

These days the sun sets slowly, as if wishing to postpone its appointment with the horizon. I watch the gradual disappearing light. Unlike winter days, in summer

it is easy to see when the day finishes and the night begins. I think about the talk I promised to give in Muswellbrook Regional Art Gallery.

Artists talking about their own artwork seems to have become almost more important than the artwork itself. I find it a questionable custom. The artwork is the testimony of what I am about as an artist, and I feel that the intentions that underpin the artwork are irrelevant. Anything I say or write about the work is an over-simplification. Words, also, might have more weight than the images they are about. On top of this there is always the effort to retain the ambiguity of the artwork while talking about it.

Picasso once said, “an artist does not paste ideas onto a canvas”. I can only agree with him. The artwork might be a result of certain pattern of thought or concerns, but when in the process of making my artworks, I follow an urge, and am not concerned with the ‘why’, or what it means.

I do have underlying objectives when painting. Among them is to unsettle the belief that humans share a common perspective. Yet, I don’t set out to be controversial, or to create an aura of fear (as some find my artwork to be).
I use ordinary situations and ordinary elements. The character of the artwork is defined upon viewing. For some viewers my work resonates with familiarity and is comfortable, while others feel alienated and frightened. There may be correct and incorrect interpretations of an artwork, but I am more concerned with getting the viewer to engage with the work rather than articulate meaning.

How we engage with an image is an interesting question. Some will read an artwork as biographical while other will look for the universal symbol.

The meaning a symbol carries goes beyond its actual (physical/real) existence. It is understood according to its status as culturally dependent. To decipher a symbol we need to consider all the forms and conceptual elements of the

artwork. The symbol does not have a single dimension; it can be interpreted in various ways, and it will always retain a part of itself that is not completely decoded. The most important principle is that the viewer can relate to the interpretation, and trace it to a cultural base. Otherwise there is always a danger of adopting an alien cultural interpretation which does not resonate with the viewer.

When I make my art, I don't consider the various symbolic implications of an object, a form or a colour I use. For example – the use of a rope emerged as a result of my preoccupation with the games children play. I drew on my experience as a child – a skipping rope. However I did not use it literally to depict my childhood, or children games in general, but turn it into a tool to explore other aesthetic interests and conceptual concerns. Such as creating an impossible situation - a rope which is looped inside the ground. While painting, the rope was stripped of any associations or meanings. In my imagination, it became an assembly of colours, forms and texture.

The rope has various symbolic interpretations. For me it represents a toy. Whereas feedback I received ranged from "a life line", "committing suicide", "residues of war" or "umbilical cord".

In the Penguin dictionary of symbols, there are many cultural interpretations of a "rope". In the broad sense, they represent a desire to ascend. The Greeks saw it as a symbol of punishment, whereas African witch doctors use ropes as instruments of magic. Central American civilizations regarded it as a symbol of divinity. In Mayan and Mexican art ropes hanging from the sky represent divine semen falling from heaven. Some textile designers have continued the Mayan tradition and symbolize rain as ropes. Others bury their dead with ropes to be used to fight off wild animals. In Japanese Shinto temples ropes keep out evil spirits and stop misfortune affecting the place. In the Koran ropes are symbols of 'ascent' which is earned through grace.

Well, for me the rope now means a childhood relic. Tomorrow, who knows, it might become a clothesline.

As the artwork evolves, it takes a life of its own, and the objects become a symbolic vocabulary. I try not to engage with the symbolic interpretation of my artwork, mainly because I don't like to lock in meaning. The symbolic meaning is only one aspect of the total experience. We don't always have the vocabulary to read this language. Therefore, to have a genuine meaningful experience, we first need to have a personal engagement with the artwork.

*

The river is up by almost half a metre. The highest I have seen it. The previously exposed Casuarina roots are underwater. The large rock on which I used to sit watching the water go by has disappeared underwater. The sharply cut banks are lush with the dreaded but graceful weeping willows. I walk waist deep in the stream, hoping that the dog's heavy stamping will alert any lazy brown snake. Hanging from the tree branches is debris left by the last gushing current. The residue of twigs, leaves and other nature's wreckage hang above me as a reminder to a mind-boggling force held within the calm water underneath me.

At the end of the day, the valley is submerged in silence. As if everything stops in anticipation of the coming night; as if wishing not to disturb the cosmic motion that eases the heat. Only when night comes and the stars appear can we sense the landscape breathing a sigh of relief, or hear the sound of a faraway truck as it breaks when descending into the village.

*

The ranges have put on a velvet green coat. The soil is soft. Weeds are back. The watermelons are ready to burst. The river has reached new heights. Traces of the last rains are everywhere. The clear water is framed by horizontal grass. Flotsam and jetsam that had been collected high above, on the casuarinas branches, now enhance the surreal picture. Birds are nesting in the branches. A family of ducks dwells amid the roots. The stones in the riverbed have regained their colour. Fallen branches suspended in the water create a new habitat for small marine life. In the river even underwater creatures live in trees.

As I sat there, on a fallen tree, legs dangling in the cool water, I gaze farther and farther upstream, where the darkness created by the willows is thick, and where the reflected lushness extends curious patterns and shapes. The light breeze is carrying new sounds in its wake. The rustle of Casuarina needles, the weeping willow brushing the water, a lonely croaking frog, a family of quacking ducks and a family of magpie on the old gum tree.

As I came out of the river I was overcome by a feeling of emptiness. The gentle breeze that composed the music in the river subsided. The heat, the motionless tall grass, the high blue sky, the green-grey hue of the gum trees, the busy bees and the silence – all collided to contrast between the lush mystery of the river and its surrounding.

In The Rings of Saturn Sebald “set off to walk the country of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of [him] whenever [he has] completed a stint of work”. The book itself is the proof that the walk helped. It should reassure me. Yet, it does not.

On the last day of summer - a tiny, yellow fluffy addition to the chicken coup. Somehow the birth of the chick reassures me.

*

Autumn

“Art is not a mirror that reflects reality but a hammer with which to change it.”
Bertolt Brecht

1.

Few weeks ago it seemed unbelievable that leaves would be changing their colour, or that frosts would cover the morning landscape. And now - the Chinese tallow tree has turned shades of russet red, and the golden elm, true to its name, has turned golden yellow. Daylight is retracting. In the mornings the dew stays longer, the wind is cooler and the chickens go to roost earlier every day. In contrast to city life, here, I know autumn has arrived by the sound of both chainsaws preparing firewood, and Leslie’s axe splitting wood.

Usually, I am reluctant to let go of these glorious autumn days. Some of this lack of enthusiasm has to do with the approaching winter. But this year in addition to the approaching unknown, I long for past seasons when events in the world seemed somehow ‘less wrong’.

On my return from New Zealand the war with Iraq broke out. I have immersed myself in the madness that characterizes the beginning of the university year. Religiously I listen to newsbreaks and watch horrific two-dimensional images on the small screens. From where I sit, in the comfort of a leather couch, the battlefield looks as if it is an austere backdrop in animated moving pictures of young soldiers in clouds of dust. Where I sit, sipping a cup of tea, I can smell the peppermint in the tea, I can smell the last flowering rose bush in the garden, I cannot smell the heat sucked into metal armoured vehicles or the burning corpses which are studding the sand.

The present cannot be amended -

The autumn leaves won't turn green again, and sudden winds will not bleach out the blood on crusted dunes.

The future is undisputed -
Sooner or later mothers and daughters would stop weeping, but their eyes would never dry.

On the way to New Zealand, I got a window seat with a view of the large wing. In the seat next to me, a young man was swaying back and forth, praying to the rhythm of some awkward sound his walkman generated. I left behind the book I was reading, but I did not forget pen and paper.

Q: by revisiting old themes am I repeating or quoting myself?
Q: does it matter?
Q: is it possible for any work of art to emerge free of ties to the past, and project its own authority?

The airplane's hum puts me to sleep, only to be startled out of a dream by the repetitive banging emerging out of my neighbour's ears.

Sometimes, as a result of a powerful dream we become preoccupied with what our dreaming self is up to. James Hillman once questioned the wisdom of such practice by suggesting that perhaps the dream-self was bothered by our day-time obsession with the interpretation of dreams.

What James Hillman said is amusing. As a psychologist he can afford the levity. However a powerful dream is a dense experience, and some find a need to express it in one way or another. Some dreamers might end up on either Hillman's or Lacan's couches, while others will choose a creative expression.

Freud claimed that all artworks based on dreams are expressions of unconscious fantasies. This seems strange to me. Perhaps some artworks, such as those created by the Surrealists were pure expressions of the unconscious. However, there is nothing unconscious about William Blake's or Miro's representations of dreams. There is nothing ignorant about Durer's depiction of a dream he had. And Susan Hiller used dreams to explore anthropological issues. Her Dream Mapping is a lucid piece and has everything to do with being aware.

I once dreamt about a place that consisted of several contradicting viewpoints. In my imagination, I visit the place again and again, revelling in its mixture of heavenly and earthly qualities. Unlike Blake's enclosed 'dreamed room', my place is an open expanse of clouds. And, unlike Blake I have not been able to give it a visual expression.

Sometimes in my dreams, I paint paintings that are just perfect. Yet in the studio I cannot replicate their quality or atmosphere. I'm never sure whether those images were so good because they were such, or because they were never created.

*

When I got up a grey light filtered through the blind. It was early. It was the advent of the first twinkles of light that would split the night from the day. Just before dawn that would tint the valley with crimson hues and would diffuse the shadows of the night. I could hear the rooster calling. The rest of the cocks in the neighbourhood answered back. Everyday, at daybreak and at noon, we hear the village's roosters asserting their territory.

It is several days since the Iraq war has commenced and I feel betrayed. Betrayed by myself for believing that I (and millions of others) would have the

power to prevent self-righteousness, for believing that common sense would prevail.

I watch images of advancing armies on a breadth of sand. My body aches with familiarity in view of the arid landscape, yet it sounds and looks unreal. As if it is the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games; or the shoulder-tapping Hollywood night of nights. Images of combat come fast and blurred as in a badly designed computer game.

The decisive heated manner with which I entered the studio changed once I faced the canvas. I don't want to enter the work through anger. There is no place for anger in the artwork. I wish for alternatives. The anger begins to dissipate the moment I feel the brush in my hand. The fury fades away with each squeeze of the paint tubes. As the movements of my hand become more determined, the anger dwindles, turning into a timid silhouette in the background.

However, on the studio veranda with a cup of green tea I gaze at the dark green mountains in the horizon and see instead swelling sandbanks.

2.

Every now and then it seems as if I live in the driver's seat. Week after week I drive from the valley to Sydney and back. There is always something to look at along the roads I take. Horse studs give way to fields of lucerne. As I pass by, vineyards gape suddenly and quickly close behind me. The only way to deal with the passing scenery is to acknowledge its fleetingness. To see something interesting I need to look right at it, to fix my gaze. If I miss it, it is gone. I cannot look back. In fact, there is no engagement with the scenery at all. Even at times when the view takes my breath away, as when the freeway descends into the Hawkesbury valley, I acknowledge it with a sigh and keep watching the changing

marks on the greying bitumen. In the distance the horizon is slowly changing while road-signs, houses, sheds, cattle and greenery pass by me.

To dissociate from the changing countryside I listen to talking books. An unfamiliar voice fills the hollow of the car. In most cases, I manage to focus on the words and make out the plot for which, in other circumstances, I have little patience. This week the voice created a void. The spoken words seem to be completely out of my line of references. Even the passing scenery looked foreign. The war has numbed my audio-visual sensibilities and sharpened the ghosts of other lives I might have led. I think of the life I might have had if I did not agree to stay as a soldier in ‘67? Or, had I stayed in the army to study architecture and became a military architect? What if instead of travelling in Europe I would have, as my mother wished, bought a house in Ein Hod?

My memories of growing up now exist mostly in black and white because the moments that made them are pasted in photo albums. Not long ago I saw photographs of myself – four years old, a large bow in my hair and holding my mother’s hand in the park. In the 50’s, photographs often came out very fuzzy, and by now they have mostly faded away. What does remain are memories of the sound of the wind in the trees, the smell of the dust in the hot air, the sound of the waves breaking on the shore, the taste of the sea-shells I collected. My early world is synesthesic and the sensory phantoms don’t let go.

Week after week I drive from bohemia to academia and back.

In academia I use conjunctions - meanwhile, otherwise, consequently, whereas, nevertheless, alternatively, however. Rarely ‘but’ or ‘and’ in the beginning of a sentence. Now and then I rebel. I use the smallest number of conjunctions possible and wish I could do without ‘prepositions’. They are mine fields in the boulevard of exchange. Untranslatable. Living between two languages is not a comfortable existence. And if, to take seriously Wittgenstein’s assertion that the

limits of one's language are the limits of one's world, I might be living in a no-man's world.

I once agreed with the notion that we cannot think beyond our vocabulary, but it does not ring true anymore. I think in glimpses. My morphology is comprised of images, and of words that don't have phonemes. The struggle begins when I want to make public my private language. The most difficult struggle is finding words to describe experiences, which took place in a language different to the language, which I use to describe these experiences. When I recall anecdotes from my life in Israel or Europe, I do it in English, a language that is foreign to their happening; a language that protects me from my past.

Back in bohemia I do without conjunctions and prepositions. And I start my sentences with 'ands' and 'buts'. And I'm not worried about the boundaries of my world. Neither am I concerned with the constraint language places on my thoughts. I have an accent. In English, which is a stress-time language, I articulate all consonants. In Hebrew, which has a syllable-based rhythm, I swallow the words. In verbal or visual, more often than not I'm misquoted.

3.

"It would appear that purity can only be maintained so long as there are innocent creatures to sacrifice in this world". Jose Saramago

I sat on the edge of my table, in front of my students. This week, instead of discussing the secrets of Hebrew Syntax we talked about the war. We discarded the linguistic cause for the sake of emotional outbursts. The students' positions concerning the war in Iraq were coloured by their sentiments towards Israel. One student was annoyed that in a lecture in Economics he had to sit and listen to the lecturer's opposition to the war. I asked him if he would have felt the same had the lecturer expressed an opinion more akin to his.

Most of the academic staff in Sydney University avoid voicing their opinions in classes. I find it difficult to hold back from referring to the bloodshed and the ensuing disaster. No matter where we are in the world, we are shouldering the same burden eyewitnesses do. Now, as on September 11, I can feel the weight of conscience. To despair and not to voice it seems to me a betrayal of sorts. I get annoyed at students for expecting us, lecturers, to go on lecturing Linguistics, Philosophy or Economics as if we have nothing to do with the world beyond the university boundary; and I am deeply disappointed by lecturers for doing just that.

The class discussion shifted rapidly from Iraq to Israel. It was partly my fault. I suggested that the money and energy that were tossed over the streets of Baghdad should be directed towards attempts to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The discussion overheated. I looked at the young faces. I remembered myself being young, opinionated and patriotic, and I wished I would not say anything I would later regret.

We all need to believe in the world we live in. It is the faith we need to have to maintain a cultured-democratic social structure. In Israel, beliefs and convictions that have helped maintain some kind of social order are now disintegrating. Young soldiers and veteran officers are voicing their disillusions. Some refuse to partake in what they believe is an outrageous conduct toward their fellow humans, while others agree to participate on grounds of solidarity with their mates but voice their discontent later. In class I quoted David Grossman's pessimistic forecast in 'Death as a way of life": "An entire nation is in coma. Six million people have allowed their mind, their will their judgment to degenerate into infuriating criminal passivity. When we emerge from the cocoon that encloses us, it is liable to be too late."

Now, the entire world has gone delirious with fear and irrational decisions that seem to render civility nonexistent.

*

At home I choose Beethoven's Pastoral, and Schubert's piano sonatas to comfort me. With the volume at full blast, I could not hear myself think. It is a perfect afternoon. I stood for a while letting the music nurture my tired head.
The soft light that had entered through the blinds was sprinkled with dust.
Outside the garden seemed to offer solace.

Weeding is the most boring activity. I would rather let weeds grow wild, and, when crucial, take round-up to the stubborn nuisance. But no chemicals or even organic pesticides are allowed beyond the fences of the two veggie patches. Today, after feeling sorry for the sad vegetables stooped under the weight of tall grass and other uninvited plants, competing for last rays of sun, I decided to attack.

In school we studied agriculture. Part of the curriculum was a bi-monthly visit to a nearby experimental farm. Sometimes we had exciting activities such as identifying flowers growing wild, or hanging around the livestock. But more often than not we had to weed. We had just the right size fingers for pulling tiny shoots of green that dared growing around lettuce, carrots or strawberries. This was the very activity I hated most. Today I can imagine the delight of the farmers – wow! Forty eleven year old are coming today!

To my surprise today's weeding was a most pleasurable experience. In fact, after an hour of physical labour, I discovered I was humming a Bob Dylan tune.
Covered in mud, I found myself in a trance of pulling and shaking.
The friable soil grinned at me when I pulled a mesh of crouch grass.
Like being on a treasure hunt, I discovered self-seeded spring onions, parsley, coriander and more tomato bushes hiding under the tall grass. I even discovered

a rare specimen towering over the abundance of strawberry plants; it turned out to be the flowering stage of a noxious weed.

*

When I woke up it was mid morning. I usually know from the quality of the light the time of the day. But that day the fog, like a silk scarf the colour of crushed pearls, seemed to have penetrated my head. I felt empty. Yet, I knew that I would continue looking for the horror; that I would read and watch everything I possibly can; that my thirst for details of the war was unquenchable.

Living the everyday has become like a swim in the Dead Sea:
Despite my perpetual mobility, I am motionless.
Despite the various vocabularies at my disposal, I am voiceless.
Yet I continue to search for words as if writing is the only thread that keeps me from crumbling.

4.

Mother died 20 years ago. Instead of placing a stone on her grave in a Tel Aviv cemetery, I dig out the text I had written in New York the day after she died. In tribute, I composed the conversation we had never had. Sad. I did not write about things we used to do together. I did not write about bedtime stories she read to me. As a matter of fact I don't remember her reading me or my brother any stories. But she did love telling stories about her life in Lithuania, before she came to Israel and met my father. One of my favourite pastimes was opening the big wooden box where she kept faded sepia photographs. These photographs portrayed good-looking young men and women, in Europe's roaring 20s', smartly dressed and smiling enthusiastically. Part of the ritual was her hesitation before

she would retell the anecdotes that contextualized the photographs. And each time when I asked: “where was this woman?”, “or what had happened to this handsome fellow?” I got one answer: “perished in the war.”

Second World War was a subject we never mentioned, unless necessary. I grew up believing that the war happened to other people; to people in photographs. Years later I made the connection that the people in the photographs were my grandparents, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins and my mother’s friends.

I tried to write about mother and ended up thinking about father. When I was little I used to find her by the sound of the sewing machine and would track him down by the smell of his cigarettes. In the bedtime stories that he would tell me, the characters were primary numbers and my task was to make the narrative out of additions, subtractions and multiplications. In the stories that I was told, there were no animals who changed their skin, nor beasts with hidden human traits. Neither creepy witches nor fair maidens. But, after my father had finished the mathematical quizzes, I would immerse myself in the adventures of Peter Pan or the story of the Emperor and his new clothes, which I read over and over.

She had died just before spring arrived in Tel-Aviv.

*

The intensity of the sun has been diluted by longer nights. This means cooler lingering dawns and shorter, shadow-less dusks. Shorter days mean that the deciduous trees will begin to open up and the various parrots will be leaving us soon for lack of seeds and shade.

I watch the shadows of the trees dissipating in the crisp, yet thinned, twilight light. The only news they bear is the arrival of a new season. In a very strange way this cheers me up. The goats, the chooks and the dogs have also brightened up

my evening. I cannot not tell them about advancing armies, of smarts bombs, or of weapons of mass destruction. They understand only news that concern light and water.

5.

Saw Polansky's Pianist with Sam. For two and a half hours, we watched on the silver screen a short chapter of our sorrowful legacy. Because of events in Poland both of us have no concept of what it is to have grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins. Because of events in Poland my parents' memories were like shadows struggling to overtake us.

Now, in a dark cinema in Sydney's eastern suburbs, their memories besiege me. I used to watch my father listening to music. After the evening meal he would go to the living room, turn on the radio and sit on the nearby armchair. He listened with closed eyes. There were times when I joined him, and he would stroke my head to the music of Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Brahms or Mahler. Other times I would stand at the doorway, watching his raptness. Mostly he was silent. Soon enough I learned to interpret the frequent sighs. They were wordless signals of thoughts he tried to keep away.

After the movie we had a night cap. We were alert and wired up and talked art. He suggested I should look at my work over the decades as relating to three deserts: in Israel, in Vienna and in Australia. I thought it was an intriguing angle by which to revisit my artworks, but I was not ready to sum up my life.

*

My history is packed with aggression. I grew up listening to tales of brutality and wrath. The sad fact is that one person's pain is another's happiness. Every moment has at least two historical turning points. I think back to the Warsaw ghetto. An old Jewish man in a wheel chair was thrown from a third floor window

to the cheers of German soldiers and to the horrified screams of Jews in the streets.

Paradoxically, the essence of Jewishness is light and beauty. In its core there is an aesthetic quest – a search for the shards of an exquisite vessel. The Kabbalah and the Talmud offer several legends about the breaking of the vessel. In one the vessel was shattered in the first act of creation. It was a vessel made of varying mixtures of light, which burst by the intensity of the light it was designed to contain. Another myth talks of a God that created and destroyed many vessels which had not been aesthetically pleasing. The millions of particles that composed the vessel fell into the realm of the demonic, and chaos begun.

On one hand, there is the belief that light is the giver of substance in the world. On the other hand, there is the belief that the world is engulfed by darkness. These two aspects have been the thread by which changes and transformations of Jewish consciousness are held together.

When I feel weighed down by the load of my birthright, by the constraints of language, and by the pointlessness of art I turn to Paul Celan.

…go with your art into your most particular narrowness, and set yourself free.

Paul Celan, The Meridian

His particular narrowness was to immortalize millions of voices with the language that had muted them – he wrote his poetry in German. Yet, it did not set him free - perhaps the Parisian water, which covered his Rumanian body and German tongue, had liberated his silence.

*

Gadamer argued that in order to carry on a dialogue one must risk making a fool of oneself. And if one fails in such an attempt, it is on a high level. Faulkner believed that a failure in the quest for perfection is a sublime failure. And Rivka says that pursuing the most beautiful story is the only quest worthy of failing.

Thinking about quests worthwhile failing in, I think back to Celan and the risks he took. Did he consider himself a failure? In his poetry, he transformed nature into linguistic patterns. The poems he wrote had become the home of which the Nazis had deprived him.

Ice, Eden
There is a country Lost,
a moon grows in its weeds,
where all that died of frost,
as we did, glows and sees.
Paul Celan

The words ring of crystals brushing against each other in a chandelier. Just slightly so, as to not disturb the poem's silence.

Sebald also used imagery of snow and ice. It seems that for both Sebald and Celan snow and ice were metaphors not only for silence and death, but also for a renewal of cultural and social values. Both lived in exile. Both wrote in German. Both use of language was sparse. Both were looking to salvage hidden things. Images of snow, ice and frost appear to be a manifestation of their struggle to discover what was undamaged in the German language.

I once read that metaphors are a way to help our mind process the unprocessable.

6.

As I descend the gentle hill to the village, the late afternoon sun catches the leaves of the willow trees along the Pages and tinting the gully bright yellow. For a second it looks as if the New England Highway has turned into the yellow brick road. Back on the estate, it is undeniably autumn, and it is dry. The grass in the paddocks is brown. The garden looks in a state of mourning. The vanishing light is sucking the colour out of the bronze-red autumn leaves and the cool air smells of April.

How does April smell? It is the smell of autumn in Australia. It is the smell of spring in New York. Describing smells is like describing pain – always looking for a word or a phrase that is not just another adjective or a simile.

*

Each week when I get back from Sydney I have to wait for the muse to slide down from the Murlow before I enter the studio for anything serious. This week, despite an overall feeling of heaviness, I'm compelled to paint. I am reminded of the polish poet Leon Staff, who lived in the Warsaw ghetto. He wrote "even more than bread we now need poetry". It is exactly during such times, when our lives are violated by aggression, that creativity confirms our humanity. Works of the imagination allow some moments of rapture amid shards of hopelessness.

I take comfort in the studio. The brush in my hand feels like solid lead. Yet I move it up and down the canvas letting sparks of lightness and weightlessness enter the world.

*

The valley is most beautiful in this season. The air is dry. Shades of ochre, rust and crimsons intermixed with few patches of fields' green. Colour, texture and smell indicate cooler weather. Frost will come soon and it will deal the last blow

to the decaying veggie garden. I should pull out the tomato plants and give the goats a cheap thrill. Instead I watch the Murlow turning a foreboding silhouette as the sun disappears behind its round summit, crowning it, for a brief instance, silvery gold.

It is difficult to stay indoors. The smell of autumn is intoxicating. Like the dogs, I wish to follow the scent that seeps into the studio. I need to remind myself that being a professional artist means doing the work even when you don't feel like doing it.

The light breeze had gathered momentum. In its wake cut grass, sunflowers petals and my short-lived enthusiasm to tackle the vegetable garden. These days, working in the garden is like preparing a new canvas. While pulling out collapsing structures of stalks and leaves, I dream of starting afresh. I dig out green potatoes. Get rid of rotten melons. Spread lime after tomatoes. Cover with horse manure, chicken-poo and hay, and let go until spring. All the while planning next year's garden.

The sky was overcast when I closed the chicken coop. The light was decreasing quickly as the low clouds rendered the day dark. There was a storm in the atmosphere. The tension was released a moment later when a lightning splits the sky just ahead of me. Another blinding flash illuminated the dim studio. It was followed by a deafening thunder. The impact knocked a framed drawing off the wall. The shards of the broken glass reflected several more flashes of lightning, and the walls shuddered in the wake of several more loud thunders. The dogs, terrified, clung to me, waiting for an explanation. This was a biblical phenomenon. Little by little the rumbling of thunder subsided into a gentle murmur and the flashes of light became a remote light show. I turned on the gentle music of Frank Morgan.

The sound of the rain on the studio's tin roof added a strange rhythm to the music. I turned off the music and listen to the rare sound of the rain. I thought of the bulbs I had planted. I could sense the daffodils and the Dutch irises pushing through the layer of soil that separated them from the moist fresh air. I could hear the grevilleas sipping the drops and the birds' song announcing the horizon was clear.

Frank Morgan's sax takes over again. My mind drifts from the swampy overgrown strawberry patch to the scattered canvases around the studio. On one easel, a beginning of a new painting depicting tyre marks on a wet ground. On another easel - the back of a woman reclining in a field of grass. I am quite pleased with the result. The paintings glow in their own light. Is there a linking thread between the paintings? Do they have an edge beyond the aesthetic pleasure? Should there be? Should I look for it?

Self-doubt became part of my life at the time when making art was no more an exercise in dexterity. Being a woman in a field that was viewed through lenses designed by male artists only exacerbated the uncertainties.
Since then, more than three decades ago, for me, self-doubt and making art go hand in hand like smoked trout and sourdough bread.

7.

This morning the paddock was shimmering under a carpet of light frost. The whitish paddock was dotted with red, yellow, brown and green leaves carried away by the night's breeze. Nature is undressing for its beauty sleep.

Fortunately, we have had a little rain every week, but the dry soil gulps every drop, and none of the fluid reaches the river. The river runs dry, or so it looks. It is a funny river – it continues to flow underground. I substitute swims with walks. I

take the dogs to explore the dry riverbed. We walk for hours. Disturbing families of ducks, king parrots and yellow crested cockatoos.

On the way back, I brushed against flowering shrub, disturbing the busy bees. I smiled remembering the allegorical verses in ‘the conference of the birds’ telling of a fly in the beehive. “…I did not know my luck; this honey’s worse than poison. Help! I’m stuck! To get into this mess I gave a grain; I’d offer double to get out again!”

I was stung by a bee, yet it is the flies that annoy me.

The weather has been gentle. I try to imagine an uninterrupted, infinite continuum of warm days. Somehow this idea worries me. I feel a strange eagerness for the approaching winter. Even the race with daylight, that preoccupies everyone around here, does not dampen my enthusiasm for the coming cold. Shorter days mean fewer temptations outside the studio. By now, I wish to be as absorbed by painting as I have been by the changing garden.

The trees are luminous. The red maple leaves are somehow brighter standing against a backdrop of the khaki colour shed. As light leaks out of the day, the trees seem to compensate. The sun has made its way northward. The air carries the odour of decaying leaves. In the west, a humbling display of the setting sun emerges behind the almost naked brunches of the sycamores, and, bit by bit, the sun slides behind the clouds. The sound of dog barking comes from all directions: from the other side of the village, and from beyond the backlit clouds. At one point, the sun sent several enormous golden-white rays through openings in the canopy before disappearing for the day. And for an instant, just before becoming one with the advancing night, the clouds radiated orange.

The rapid change of light reminds me of driving towards the sunrise one Monday morning. Along the highway bales of hay, lying in the fields looked like cattle grazing, and vice versa. The horizon was dotted with white goats that looked like

teeth in the valley's jaw. I confused trees for clouds and clouds for woods. For a moment I considered turning back and waiting for my head to clear. The mist sucked the colour out of the air, turning earth and sky lucid ivory. Still, behind this world of dove-greys, the rising sun promised a colourful day, with its grand finale at dusk, such as I have just witnessed.

And, still, I am not next to the easel.

Artists, says Ashenbach in Death in Venice, are like hunters aiming in the dark. Not knowing what the target is.

*

This rambling of words did pave a path back to the easel. I inserted Schubert's Piano Sonatas, Chopin's Nocturnes and Ashkenazy playing Rachmaninov's preludes and let the music repeat throughout the day. It echoes from the hills when I walk to the house and back to the studio. It reverberates from wooden posts that enclose the chicken coup, when I enter to check if the newborn chicks are still with us. I place a large stone in their deep water-dish to prevent drowning. Once I saved a tiny black chick from drowning in the water dish. A traumatic experience for all three involved – mother, chick and me. The chick had given up, and was floating. The mother was agitated and took her fury on me. When I lifted the weightless wet creature, I was sure it was dead. I left it on the ground, lifeless, and ran for my life. The mother-hen took one look at the pile of tiny feathers and continued fussing over her other offsprings. In the evening when I came to lock the coop's gate, the black chick I saved was happily jumping with the rest of its siblings.

8.

Fifty-seven years ago, I was born. The numbers I type do not look like they belong to me. They seem to count the years of a stranger. As if reported on the news: "a fifty-seven years old middle-aged woman has celebrated her birthday

among the tall Cedar trees in a nature reserve next to her local village. She has last been seen photographing reflected grass in a nearby creek. She carried little water and no provision. When night falls, wild pigs are known to roam the country where she was last seen."

We wanted to celebrate the day in the Cedar Brush, but could not find it. Instead we talked to an elderly woman at the foot of a mountain the Aborigines named the Wingen Maid, after a woman who had cried for her dead husband. We did not see wild pigs rampaging through the pristine country. But she told us that they sold two thousand acres of their property to Germans who love the taste of wild pigs

*

A settled drizzle and a thick grey curtain besiege the valley. It is wet. The RTA is building a new bridge over the Pages river, an adjunct to the old one. Four lanes over a river that might not be. The workers on the bridge looked bewildered as I walked down the dirt road, two large black dogs trailing me, and two cameras dangling from my neck. The river was broader next to the highway. The water cascaded gently over the flat rocks. The willows on the open banks seemed to weep more gracefully. By the time I reached the newly dug up road the sun had emerged.

The area I was interested in was a piece of land with a murky chart of tracks left by yellow cranes, heavy trucks and cars pulling horse floats. The rain returned before I finished snapping the marks they had left on the wet soil. Inspired, I walked briskly back home. To the west the sky was dark grey; to the east it was bright blue. Above me, where the two colours merged, a pronounced rainbow was arched between the mountain range to the north and the range to the south. Behind it, about 20 degrees to the west, another rainbow, a faded version, was

reflected in the dark grey sky. I pulled out the camera from its case and pressed, only to find out that I had run out of film.

*

The ‘estate’ has a garden and a paddock: the ‘garden’, a relatively small section of the property, where the grass is mowed regularly. To cut the grass in the rest of the acreage we use a ride-on mower. For the last year Leslie has been constructing paragraphs of his book while circling the paddock. For hours at a time he goes round and round, a content smirk on his face. While the tall grass and assortment of weeds surrender to the blades of the machine, his ‘Zen and the Art of the Ride-On’ is taking shape.

And now I have discovered the joy of circling the paddock. I climb onto the Rover, adjust the level of the blade and off I go, feeling like a child all over again - it is just like riding bumper-cars in Luna Park.

I look behind me. Bright green where the surface has been slashed contrasted with the dull green of the cut grass piled along the trail. I have already learned that if I want to rake the cut grass, and use it as mulch, I had better be systematic. Always clockwise. But, from time to time I feel naughty and go counter clockwise. At times I use the machine as a brush. Making marks.

The wind has strengthened, making the ride more comfortable. The unmowed grass sways in the wind, and the light catches in its tips. Beyond the flat field, the mountains reflect the descending day. I ride among the fruit trees in the orchard, picking a ripe apricot or a pear. As a child I spent a week on a small farm by myself. I said good-bye to my mother in the garden next to the house, and immediately after her departure ran and hid in the adjoining orchard. At that time, a week in a bucolic setting was a promise of excitement. It was my first stay alone away from home. The expectations were vast and so was the

disappointment. I was looking forward to picking fruit, milking cows, collecting chicken and pigeon eggs and perhaps a ride on the yellow tractor.

I shared a room with the children who warned me of various night creatures. The first night I worried about an insect that for some reason crawled into little girls' ears. It hooked its pincers onto the eardrum and caused deafness. I did not want to return home defeated by nature. The first morning I woke up late. The chickens were already fussing over their feed. At the back door a large basket of freshly picked green apples. In time I collected eggs, picked plums, climbed trees and played hide and seek in the cowshed. I never forgot the unpleasant taste of fresh warm milk, and never lost the fear of that night crawler whose purpose in life was to make little girls deaf.

The day I found out that there was no evidence that earwigs, nocturnal insects with a pair of pincers, crawl into ears, I was a touch disappointed. Deep down I wished to be able to believe again in unsubstantiated stories.

*

The grass is usually a home for a plethora of insects. Spiders, grasshoppers, crickets, stick creatures, moths, butterflies and others which I could not name to save my life. As the ride-on advances I watch weeds and grass cave in, and an army of panicked creatures running for their life. They hop, jump, creep, crawl and fly to find shelter in the uncut grass. At times I see myself as a greedy landlord, evicting the tenants, or worse still – a demolisher of homes.

After the heavy rain, the grasshopper population has reached plague proportions. I enjoy watching Mishka's surprise when she grabs one, chews it and spits it out crinkling her already crinkled face. Tara, on the other hand, follows the hopping insects with her lady-like gaze. The chickens are in seventh heaven. They run across the paddock snatching grasshopper in midair.

This afternoon as I drove the mower the grasshoppers were popping out of the grass like corn in a hot pot. Accompanying them were hundreds of minuscule creamy butterflies. Well, the grasshoppers are really locust and the butterflies are really tiny moths. In any case they formed a flickering entourage that made me feel I was a character in Marquez's magical Macondo. It did not take the chooks long to make the connection between the sound of the advancing ride-on and the abundance of extra protein. They trailed me, just like biblical Ruth who gleaned after the reapers in Boaz's field.

Hypnotized by the marks the ride-on leaves behind, I decided to rebel. Instead of methodically slashing in parallel rows, I drove in circles leaving behind round patches of tall grass. I thought of them as of gigantic stepping-stones for visitors from other planets.

The setting sun caught the tips of the grass and the circles turned bronze. From a distance they looked like metal puddles in an expanse of lime green moss. Or perhaps they looked like bronze buttons on a velvet garment. By the time I got the camera out the sun had withdrawn her generosity, leaving the paddock the colour of ash; a perfect backdrop for the two red winged blue parrots that were munching and chuckling along the edge of the cut grass.

Observing the sad aftermath of my ephemeral installation of grass and light, I contemplate – must a work of art be witnessed or shared, to be considered as such? Is the intention to make a work of art crucial to its being one?

Unlike the dinghy in the back of the yard that we filled with water and water plants, today's performance was as transient as it get. No discerning creatures saw my performance. Only grasshoppers, moths, perhaps the parrots, the chooks, and my two mongrel bitches had witnessed my work of art.

As works of art go, those ‘grass ponds’ were neither private nor public art. They existed in the paddock in a natural context with other things. They could be considered art only because I have made them known by writing about them.

When is an object a work of Art?

Richard Wollheim argues that an object that provokes a certain perceptual experience is a work of art. In other words, an object is an artwork when it offers aesthetic experiences that involve the imagination of both maker and viewer. When I make a work of art and keep it private, I am its only audience. I am both the maker and the viewer who gives it validity.

It seems that most artworks that do not add to our aesthetic values turn to theory to give them the vitality it lacks. Mel Bochner believes that the ‘ideal conceptual work’ is one that “can be linguistically portrayed and experienced in its verbal representation”. Thus the ponds of bronze are a conceptual artwork whose existence beyond my personal experience depends on someone reading these very words and being able to conjure up a mental image of my installation.

In opposition, Sol LeWitt claims that in conceptual art all the deliberations and choices must be drawn out before carrying out the work. Thus the arbitrary nature of my sketches in the grass, the lack of intention to make a work of art, makes the finish product a mere therapeutic exercise.

In the paddock, where I make marks on the surface of the earth, and in the studio where I mark the surfaces of canvases, I am always an audience of one witnessing both the process and the final creation. The process of layering brush strokes fascinates me. And so does the methodical progression of the ride-on.

Both processes are extremely seductive. However, making public the process of creating might undermine the mystery an artwork generates. An artist, who

comes out from behind the work and waves to the audience, may spoil the magic. Perhaps by holding on to the mystery of making art, artists perpetuate the preciousness of art. But, the other alternative – making the process itself the artwork - is even more pretentious. Because only a limited public appreciates the juxtaposition of information such artworks claim to put forward.

An artwork is a collection of doings. When it is exhibited at its final stage, the surface does not offer suggestions to the previous stages. Some viewers are able to speculate on the process that brought about the final work. It would be a conjecture, and this could become, for better or worse, a significant part of their aesthetic experience of the work.

*

All that grass inspired two new paintings; another duo in the series of concave/convex, the fifth since 1979: a disintegrating nest floating on calm water and a pool of agitated water nested amidst disturbed spinifex. I find the idea of concave/convex intriguing. The very same line that creates concave automatically creates convex, two opposites, each existing by virtue of the other.

At times I am tempted to do a ‘Jan Dibbets’ or ‘Andy Goldsworthy’; to use actual natural objects as material for my artwork. I could dig out a section of the paddock; I could pile up cut grass; I could paint the trunk of a young tree bright pink, record its growth and record the natural patterns it makes in the space it occupies; I could plant trees and make them grow in unnatural interesting ways; I could shape nature according to my wildest imagination.

Somehow it feels wrong to torture nature.
Instead I paint various interpretations of concave and convex.

9.

I prefer to let the artwork evolve rather than have it as an illustration of an idea. What I create is essentially an outpour of uncertainties; a dialogue between the probable and the improbable. Perhaps this is why I find talking about my art difficult. I use repetitions as a way of exploring possible interpretations of a situation, and usually I cannot elaborate much more than what I had already depicted in the artworks.

Although I find discussing my art difficult, I give a talk as part of the survey exhibition of my work in the local Regional gallery. I don't mind describing the process of making a painting, or telling how it feels to make a certain artwork. But that is very different from telling what the work is about. I feel strongly that the artwork should stand free of my intentions and interpretations.

Words cannot save an artwork. So while I talk I keep in mind two quotes at odds with each other. First, Tom Wolf's assertion that: "art theory is to artists like entomology is to insects." Second, S. Eliot's warning that we should not make rushed distinctions between the creative and the critical, because "the frightful toil of sifting, combing, constructing and correcting, is as much critical as creative".

Talking about the work is a process in progress – a continuum of thinking and articulating, where the artwork is always the focal point. However, as a maker I cannot view the work from the outside. A discussion with an audience allows me to understand the nature of the relationship between the viewer and the artwork. Such an exchange allows me to learn about the gap between my intentions when making art and the viewer's interpretation. Sometimes this gap is bridgeable, and at other - a baffling abyss.

For me an audience represents the second phase in the life of an artwork. It is the phase where the work acquires layers of meanings over which I have no control. In the people who listen to my talk, I read expectations and

appreciations, and it reminds me of myself, just a few nights ago when Alex opened my show:

…We celebrate the contribution that our artists make to our communities. Wherever you travel in the world, there are always artists and they invariably enrich their communities. They enrich their communities in so many different ways. Some artists operate like the canaries taken into mines and warn us that our communities are getting unsafe. Other artists create work which shapes their community and survives long after that civilisation has disappeared. A few weeks ago, my family had the great pleasure of visiting Angkor. The Angkor civilisation survived for almost half a millennium but was destroyed by invasion 800 years ago. All that survives of that civilisation is the work created by the artists of Angkor. Other artists remind us of the importance of dreaming and trying to keep connecting to the intangible, the ineffable. Yet other artists play an important role in our economy with dazzling designs.

We live at a time when short-term benefits are emphasised. People speak of short-term maximisers. Artists are not short-term maximisers. They operate in a different time frame. They provide the links between generations, between centuries. We know little of the Netherlands of the seventeenth century but everyone knows of Rembrandt and maybe another twenty astonishing painters of his time. This was a time when the Netherlands had suddenly become very wealthy but still had a small population of perhaps not much more than a million. All those artists from such a small population. But we don't remember the Netherlands of the seventeenth century for her wealth, or her then empire, or her politicians or sportsmen and women. No, we remember the Netherlands of the seventeenth century for her artists. And that is often the case.

This is the tradition that Hanna Kay [is] part of. The eyes of our artists help shape the way we see the world. How many of us now sometimes see a hill and think that it would have appealed to Fred Williams. Or a coastal scene to Arthur Streeton or a river scene to Arthur Boyd...

*

In Elmswood past and antiquity encroach on the present and the contemporary. Phillip collects remnants of vanished civilizations. He is the keeper of objects that represent dreams, fears and hopes. Although surrounded by death, the walls of the rooms teem with life. Although the objects are of distinct periods on a historical timeline, they come together to make a multifarious moment which lies beyond a conventional chronological perspective.

We sit across from each other talking art and culture, while drawings of old masters breath down our neck. I feel like a shackled Alice in Wonderland. Patrice enters the room with tea and a fruitcake. Her lightness and wholesome beauty makes the sumptuous heaviness of the room more pronounced.

Scores of Etruscans, Pre-Colombian, Roman, Egyptian and other ancient and not so ancient artefacts intermingled with drawings, paintings, knives, portraits and other unique human creative endeavour. Because in Elmswood the presence of the past is so overwhelming, it is easy to become aware of what we, humans, have lost over time. The disappearance of civilizations makes the things that have survived more significant, and the ingenuity of their artists ever so more pronounced. Exactly what Alex had spoken about.

*

In the studio the lizards gave me an annoyed look. Eric found a mate and went forth and multiplied. Now, I have a family of four lizards squatting in the studio, annoyed at me for disturbing their breakfast of dead moths. Otherwise they are completely oblivious to my coming and going. They assemble in the middle of the room, talking over strategies for capturing spiders or just having a break from playing hide and seek. They leave their droppings around and on top of the laptop, and remind me of a dream I had years ago, upon arriving at Sydney. In my dream, lizards, their bodies the colours of the rainbow, were playfully jumping

on and around my desk; diving off the monitor and twisting themselves in and out of the keyboard.

*

The rain is not easing. The garden next to the house is submerged in brown soup. Water has collected around the young trees creating oval mirrors reflecting grey sky. The reflected surfaces look like platinum doors to parallel worlds. The path between the house and the studio has turned into a minor river. The rubber sheets that make the path hover above the deep puddles like rafts that have lost their way. Some puddles are so deep that the ripple I make spill into my gumboots. Now I worry that the plants will not survive the over watering.

This morning I put on gumboots, a raincoat and went to pick figs. The birds were getting the upper most ones, while the chickens picked the fruit on the lower branches. I still had enough to fill a large basket. Savouring the sweet wet figs, I splashed in the puddles that had collected around the house. Just like little red riding hood, only my hood was black.

From the studio, I could hear the sound of the river gushing. The flooding river was impressive. It had doubled its width and added at least two meters to its depth. The torrent was ferocious. There was a storm raging inside the strong current. Rocks were carried away, trees were uprooted and flotsam and jetsam were deposited on tree tops.

On turning back, I noticed how tall were the trees that we had planted as tube stock only couple of years ago. I walked leisurely around the periphery of the estate. The young gum trees had developed an impressive silver-green canopy. Some were covered with a red bloom and others with ochrous-orange buds ready to explode in a pink song. There is something of the unexpected in a gum tree in bloom. There is something absurd about the delicate, sparkler-like flowers

bursting among the tough grey/green leaves. All around the estate trees and shrubs were bent over under the weight of the rain. I made a mental note to collect fallen branches that succumbed to the storm. I continued my stroll bemused by the spider webs that were dangling from tall branches like discarded delicate pearl necklaces.

I picked gigantic field mushrooms that had sprouted under several gum trees. Each the size of a dinner plate. I fried them with onions and lots of garlic. Just as the mushroom flesh had retained the smell of rotting organic matter, so had my memory preserved the smell of burnt bodies submerged in hot sand.

Even here, on the estate, thinking about war is as far-off as the next weed. Even the natural forces that haunt us do not distract from thinking about the destructive unnatural forces.

10.

This afternoon, after reaching a dead end with the wet canvases I took the dogs to the river. Upon descending the bank, for a split second it looked like there was a mirror at the bottom of the gully. The river's surface was still and exceptionally clean. Not a floating leave or a twig in sight. The water reflected a day charged with its own clarity. It mirrored autumn exuberance. In the water, I waited motionless for the ripples to subside, letting hundreds of tiny fish nibble at my feet.

The recent gushing current had polished the stones on the riverbed. The green algae were flushed away to reveal hues of red, white, orange and blacks. Casuarina branches bowed under the weight of debris, created arches within the cathedral-like setting, which was formed by the tall trees on both banks. From the angle I was looking at the water, I could see the curved space above me

replicated in the water. I formed a centre point in a sphere; suspended between arches, curves, and blue sky.

I feel frustrated. No words, brush strokes or a camera lens can duplicate this moment. In such moments, I wish I had Italo Calvino's ability to create a baffling paradox of space in time; or Marguerite Duras' way with words, so that I could use the scenery as a backdrop to a magical love story.

11.

In the morning when I drove to town a narrow band of clouds lay low against the range making the mountains look as if they were floating. The rising sun drained the colour out of the valley, leaving the yellowing poplar trees to stand out like burning candles in a mud cake. When I came back, I caught a glimpse of the golden rain trees we had planted next to the road to shade visitors' cars. Their leaves shimmered gold in the morning sun. All that luminosity made me think again about the circles of cut grass against the setting sun.

Over breakfast, I asked Maya and Leslie whether my bronze grass puddles were works of art. For Leslie there was no doubt they were not, since the puddles were not documented. Maya asked – and if she would have drawn a beautiful drawing on paper and then destroyed it?

For her, the aesthetic experience of one viewer was enough to establish an object as a work of art. The silence that followed was interrupted by the monotonous sound of a revolving chainsaw on the other side of the hill. The sound of approaching winter.

So I asked, yet again – when I revisit my images, am I repeating or quoting myself? Leslie said that the verb 'to quote' should be used only in reference to

written or spoken language. Maya gave him a bemused look, and declared him conservative.

*

Winter is approaching. The estate is wearing a technicolour coat. Autumn colours are followed by autumn sounds – the irritating noise of wood chipping and the screech of migrating birds. The sounds of last autumn, and of the autumn before, and, I dare predict, of future autumns, mark the end of summer.

We need the reassurance that summer will be followed by autumn; the comfort of knowing that some kind of an order will prevail. So, in tribute to the circular motion of the world, I let Billy Holiday voice repeat itself. The words she sings curl along the studio's walls:

…Autumn in New York, is often mingled with pain,
It's autumn in New York, It's good to live it again…

The knowledge that "that which has been, it is that which shall be; and that which has been done is that which shall be done; and there is nothing new under the sun," (Ecclesiastes) is both comforting and burdensome.

For Nietzsche "the eternal recurrence is the heaviest burden 'most terrible thought', because everything occurs as we once experienced, ad infinitum".

The world would have been an interesting place if, as he believed, the circular repetition was a real probability. Only the thought of such a possibility could transform us.

How would we behave if we knew we had to live the same way infinitely? Would we hurry to declare wars? Would we hurry to deplete our resources?

*

While I was debating whether to head towards the studio or the river, the quality of the light convinced me to the former. I wished I could capture the glow that engulfed the valley, place the colours in the pockets of my vest, and then release them on a canvas!

The sun had just moved behind the cumulus clouds that were threatening all afternoon. The sight was dramatic but the light was soft; somehow diluted by the cool air. It washed the valley with a brief unmitigated glow. The nearby grass took on a yellow-pink hue. The field in the distance was brownish-pink, and the distant hills were an array of blues, speckled with golden patches.

On one easel a painting of marks left by car tyres, on another, a nude.
Which painting should receive the yellow-pink light?
But, both paintings refused to accept the light.

When I paint I follow a course which I trace roughly at the start of the work. I follow this course, watching carefully for new terrains. These new places are what make the process interesting. Yet they could become an intrusion. There are times, when I get carried away by new possibilities and loose my bearings. I become absorb with details, texture or both and fail to notice that what I had done makes the work weak.

When I discover that I went too far in a wrong direction; that I must go back to the fork in the road; that I must cover my tracks, I need nerve. I need to be brave and destroy sections of the painting that by themselves might be great achievements. Over the years I have learnt not to consider the work too precious. I used to keep works on which I laboured lovingly even if they did not seem right. These days I either paint over or burn the paper.

I look at the tyre tracks I paint. They become a metaphor for the tracks I follow in the process of painting. They become a metaphor for the very path I am treading. I let the painting ask the question, and hope that it will refuse inappropriate answers. Every morning I enter the studio and watch the changes. I proceed slowly. Carefully I layer paint, as if not to cause its demise. I don't want to cover my tracks. I don't want the latest layer of paint to block out the previous ones. I want to see through the luminous opacity which is the surface of the canvas.

This way of working is more considerate. There is humility to it.

Instead of urging the paintings to receive the colour of an autumn dusk, I write these words, with an overwhelming feeling that paint and words fail me. No semiotic system is equipped for the ephemeral nuances of light.

*

I live in a chasm between languages - both English and Hebrew fail me. I cannot express in words certain experiences, neither can I render in images certain feelings. A cultural misfit.

I wish I could believe with Ronald Barthes that 'the confusion of tongues is no longer a punishment, the subject gains access to bliss by the cohabitation of languages working side by side.' In contrast with biblical Babel that stood as an emblem of god's wrath, he named modern 'confused' text 'happy Babel'. However, for me a bilingual world is closer to a nightmare than bliss.

*

Me, agitated: The tracks are muddy.

Leslie confused: again?
Me: the painting of wet tyre tracks! it is not happening.
Leslie, smiling: you are cute!
Me: what do you mean by ‘cute’?
Leslie bemused: the world is collapsing into torturers and morons and you are worried about tracks in mud rather than tracks in water.
Me: it keeps me sane.
Leslie: persistently so.

A work in progress quickly becomes feral. It reverts to a wild state overnight... It is a lion you cage in your study. As the work grows, it gets harder to control…; You must visit it everyday and reassert your mastery over it.

Annie Dillard

The current ‘caged lion’ in the studio is the painting of tracks that refuses to be submerged in water. This morning I entered the studio with determination to reclaim my authority over it. ‘Yall’ah’ I shouted with a brush in my hand. Many hours later, after having limited my horizon to the large rectangle of the canvas, I step back and “saw that it was good” (genesis 1). But the painting was far from being tamed. This inanimate object, made out of stretched linen and paint, was unquestionably in charge. Stubbornly it resisted my attempts to regain control. And because the tracks that had replaced the original idea were quite exciting, I decided to follow what had emerged.

12.

Flocks of white-winged choughs have adopted the western paddock. They run around on the grass in family-groups of twelves. This morning a dozen of such groups speckled the ground, making it look like a light-ochre chenille with black polka-dots. They did not fly away when I approached. Seated on a branch, just above the grazing choughs was a falcon. I stopped. I realized it was eyeing the

chooks as well as the choughs. A drama was unfolding. I called the dogs. My voice interrupted the still morning air. One chough raised a head. I was not sure which imminent disaster it registered, but it spread its wing and took off in the direction of the nearby hill. The rest of the flock in its wake. I watched the disappointed falcon with anticipation. One of our young hens was scratching alone under the large gum tree on which the bird of prey was perched. A panicked rabbit saved the day. Frightened by the approaching large bitches it alerted the chooks, whose kafuffle sent the falcon flying west.

*

In town everybody is talking about the weather, apologizing for favouring one season over another. The locals explain to me that autumn is a continuum of glorious days. At the general store a farmer smiled generously, as if sharing a season's secret: 'It will be a cold winter' he reassured us, as if we were fooled by plenty of good weather and thought that winter would bypass us. Nobody articulated what was on everybody's mind – plenty of glorious days and frosty nights meant the return of the drought

Today the valley looks as if it has been granted an extra dimension. The landscape seems to have been extended. The overabundance of late summer greens, which at times reduces the valley to two dimensions, has given way to a profusion of bright earthy colours. Against the evergreen eucalyptuses, grevilleas and wattles, those colours give the landscape an added breadth. I was overcome by an urge to list methodically the bands of colours I could distinguish: the yellowing fields along the highway; the procession of poplars, sycamores, ashes, and other deciduous trees in the near to middle distance; and finally the cornucopia of pallid shades that made the range appear farther than it really was. Each stretch of flora seemed to be radiant with a light of its own.

The leaves are hanging on. One brisk wind and the trees will stand bare. They will expose the landscape, letting daylight reach the damp surface under the decomposing leaves. At times I feel that when writing these words I hope to make the place I live more real. By describing the difference between leaves in the shade and leaves that reflect light, I wish to tame the world around me and be part of its topography.

Our local friends know the topography of the area by referring to things that happen in certain seasons: “at the creek where we saw the deer last winter”, “in the summer when the town was flooded, and that woman died while rescuing a cow from the ferocious current’, “exactly, where the fire was few summers ago”, “next to the slope where the cow died on its way to the muddy dam, in the middle of last summer drought.” When I understand this mapping of the place, I feel part of the common experience; I feel that I participate in shaping local history. But more often then not, I just listen and am conscious of yet another language I need to master.

*

Some days when the day is bright I look at the naked garden and imagine it under a thick blanket of snow. The bare branches dusted white. The spines of rose bushes just about buried under the snow. Snow flakes suspended in the air against the green of the Murlow. Paw marks of big black dogs in white soft ground. Yet such an image seems a paradox. Perhaps because my imagination does not extend to flowering gum trees and grevilleas sprinkled with buoyant white flakes.

The metamorphosis of the landscape is unlike Ovid’s or Kafka’s.
Kafka wrote about a man transformed into a cockroach. He used a bug to represent the oppressed underdog; a parable to a world that had gained control over the individual. Ovid, on the other hand, wrote about a woman changing into a lotus tree, to represent the idea that all things, including human, plants,

animals, could be transformed into something else; as if knowing the qualities, shapes and attributes that make up things could dissolve the solidity of the world.

The words I write are an attempt to make connections between the metamorphosis of the imagination and that of nature. When I write I can go in different directions and open up vistas I only dream of when painting. When I write it is not a plot, but rather what a plot would sideline that interests me. In contrast, when actively painting, if I let the brush follow new tracks, which may reveal themselves while engaged in a specific concern, I am always at the risk of loosing it.

When making images metaphors are my main resource.
When writing I call on metaphors last, to make the portrayal precise.

I read that metaphors are a way to help our mind process the unprocessable. But metaphors are useless when it comes to talking about silence and absence.

*

The rhythmic sound of a cargo train on its way north or south echoes from the ridges. I like the silence that follows the last freight carriage. In a drought the silence is loud. Birds and insects take their song to greener pastures. Drought in the winter is even louder. Diluted light and thinner air render the day naked.
In the orchard, under each fruit tree there is a ring of fallen leaves. Golden for the apricots, rust for the pears, and yellowish brown for the rest. Rows of naked, graceless naked pomegranate shrubs seem to be emerging out of shimmering gold puddles...

In spring and summer, the trees give solidity and weight to the landscape. These days they create a delicate pattern of glitter foliage and wooden veins, giving the

landscape a fragile quality – an unbearable lightness. Autumn in the valley renders even autumn in New York wanting.

WINTER

…Time is not a rope one can measure from knot to knot, time is a slanted and undulating surface which only memory can stir and bring closer.

Jose Saramago

1.

The estate acreage has been the canvas on which I paint with colours I don't usually use in my artworks. It is my way of implanting my idiosyncrasy onto the soil. These time of the year, each day brings a feeling of wonder. One moment some of the trees look like huge green clouds. A moment later the colour changes, the leaves fall and the trees expose their bony skeleton.

Between the cottage and the studio, we planted a selection of deciduous trees. Now they are in the process of turning from a deep green into a distinct mock orange, from dark grey-green into fiery claret, and from lime-green into luminous yellow. Although still young, their colour display, both individually and as a group, creates quite an impression.

In winter, the light is forever changing. Lingering frosted dawns pursued by short intervals of sunshine, which are brutally interrupted by short dusks. The sun skirts about the day, like an unwanted refugee tracing the periphery of a promised land. There is no better place to watch the sun being chased away by the approaching darkness, as on top of the Burning Mountain.

After a climb through a typical Australian bush, a change - dozens of dead trees lie where they fell not so long ago, with their roots exposed. The forest floor is

barren. Only gum trees grow in this earth baked by an underground burning seam of coal, undernourished they gave in to the power of gravity. Shadows blend. The pale light that penetrates the thin canopy above creates an atmosphere of doom.

The scenery reminds me of the images I created years ago, in which trees were liberated from gravity. Hues of ashen brown are the dominating colour. And along the trail are patches of burnt earth turned ochre, rust, yellow and white. The very same colours I used to make the images of shadows cast upon bare landscape.

By late afternoon, we'd reach the white smouldering summit. The view is of rolling green hills extending into a horizon that tints them blue. To the east, we see the tops of Barrington Ranges, and to the west - the rocky surface of the Wingen Maid.

An Aboriginal legend tells that about five thousand years ago, people from the north plotted to kidnap local women to be their wives. When the local people heard of the plan, they sent their warriors to battle with the people of the north. One of the wives of a local warrior sat on top of a mountain to wait for his return. When she heard that her husband had been killed, the woman asked the great sky god to kill her too. He, on his part, turned her into stone. As she was becoming stone, she cried tears of fire that set the mountain alight. Apparently, if I were to look closely at the rock face, I could see the warrior's wife waiting for her husband. Each time I climb to the top of the Burning Mountain, I look for her. I guess my eyesight is not good enough.

Scores of kangaroos watch us in bewilderment. The white ash is dotted by their black dropping. The ground on which I stand looks like Mars' surface. Deep cracks in the rock emit hot air that smells odiously of sulphur. I could just about imagine Aboriginal people using the vents for warmth and cooking. Now

kangaroos use the summit as a communal loo.

The hilltops turn dark as the sun races westward - a sharp contrast to the white ash, the shimmering air above the deep vents, and the bleached tree trunks on the ground. I consider myself blessed that this geological wonder exists just within a stone throw away from where I live.

2.

A flickering glow radiates from the wood-fire, rendering the studio shades of pinks and greys. This is the time when I go inside, to the warmth of the imagination and introspection. This is the time when I rummage through past journeys. I dig out something I wrote, sitting in the shadow of a baobab tree in the Northern Territories:

Here, the sun infuses the shadows with presence;
Here the sun liquefies past and present.
Here, rugged cliffs and scrubland are voiceless confirmation to the stories we hear.

My thirst cannot be satisfied. I cannot get enough of what I hear.

Billy's Dreamtime tales gradually draw me into my past. Stories that speak the gap between them and us. Am I them or us?
Lightning men, full moon woman, longneck turtle, frog lady, and a little boy who split the dog's ear. The dog howled and the killing began. At creation their shadows disappeared into the rocks leaving their footprints on the surface.
I touch the coloured imprints. I don't ask. I want to believe..
The dead encircled us.
Their stories are filled with blood and pain.
Our stories are filled with blood and pain.
I am reading Fugitive Pieces. Ann Michael wrote "History is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral." I listen to Billy's tales of violence and conflicts. It seems to me that

“their” memory is (generally considered) amoral, while “our” memory is (generally considered) moral.
Yet the smell of blood on rocks is neither moral nor amoral.
The smell of blood on hot sand is repulsive in any memory.

Because Billy’s heroes are rocks and leaves as well as ‘Mimis’, we get to hear not only about his people but also about the country.
Only fragments of his narrative remain.
He names trees, flowers and seeds that I forget as soon as he utters the words
He calls for the energy of leaves; shows us herbs for cooking which will poison fish;
He reaches out for the time that changes things; the time that readies Emu’s eggs; that transforms a hollowed gum to a musical instrument.
He points to the rocks that remind him of his rite of passage. This is the sugar-bag dreaming, he whispers. He does not show us the scars. We can see them in his sparkling eyes; in the way his didgeridoo sounds.

We, 10 middle age white women, seize the faint traces of another culture. Last year we followed animal tracks in the fossilized mud of Lake Mungo. This year we follow imprints of dreams carved into the rocks strata.

This hunger for understanding is as strong as passion, as if by decoding every centimetre of traces in words, we solidify time. We stand, facing a pile of stones. Billy’s dark face betrays emotions. Jews also place a stone on a grave in remembrance of the dead. For the Jews the dead are a memory. For Aborigines - life is a memory.

There is no nostalgia in him. He does not look back to the dead.
For him the dead inspire the living.

Around the fire, with us, Billy lacks confidence. Walking up the hill he gains poise. His son in his footsteps and we follow. His long and slim limbs stay afloat scattered leaves. .
A bird’s screech pierces the dry silence.

The leaves, a thousand shades browner than earth, are witnesses to a vanishing tradition. In my mind I place on one side - red-hot resin, the smell of burnt wood and dark

ground baking in the sun. On the other side - dry blood, the smell of burnt bones and burnt white sand. In 1904 Aboriginal people were packed into the ground then covered with leaves. In 1944 Jews were packed into the ground then covered with soil. In 1967 Arabs were packed into the ground then covered with dunes. Today memories are packed into the ground and covered with stones.

“Destruction doesn’t create vacuum, it simply transforms presence into absence”.

I alternate my gaze between Ann Michael’s words and an image on the rock - a simple image that had faded over thousand years. I am mesmerized by the way time is recorded in creases and folds. Rocks tell of killer crocodiles, dynamic ladies and mother creation.
In this part of the world destruction has intensified presence.
I think of my own mythology, which lacks ancestral imagery.
I cannot picture my ancestors under a rock. Dancing their fears. Drawing their dreams. In caves and rock shelters, indigenous parents teach their children how to dance to the music of their dreams. We hear what they are allowed to tell. We see what they are permitted to show.

In Europe too, they took cover in caves. In their hiding places children watched parents wishing to teach them how to dream; wishing to teach them the music for their dreams. They told us what they were not allowed to see. We heard what they permitted themselves to tell.

For Billy the dead are alive and the livings are dreaming.

At night, lying in the swag, my body suggests great ignorance. I imagine watching the fresh water crocodile chasing the longneck turtle. I’m lying in the bush next to the rainbow serpent. We’re not touching, but then he wants to know why I don’t know how to dance?
I say that my legs are weary from reading images on murals and touching dreams carved in the rock.

During the day, we needed both hands to climb out of an image. Sometimes there were steep places where we walked in line holding on to crumbling pigments. Up on the escarpment I could feel the pull between earth and sky. By late afternoon the pull eased, it had drifted over the pink rocks of Arnhem Land. I could still hear its grasp when the sun set over the billabong.

It has become a memory.
Memories may fade if not used.

The first time I went to the desert I was surprised by the lack of sweeping sand dunes. The parched desert that surrounds the Dead Sea is more like fossilized sand ridges and mounds. They form a maze of ravines and valleys that frame the basin of the salty lake. An awesome place where only a scorpion could hear you sing, and only a crow's cry might disturb the silence.

The first time I went to the Australian desert I was surprised by the lushness of the country. But, it was neither the unusual flora nor the exotic fauna; neither the dramatic colours of rugged cliffs nor the texture of scrublands that seized me. It was the quality of the light. It washed over stones baking for eons in the unrelenting sun. It squeezed into nooks and crannies, swept shadows and distorted perspective. It altered space and transformed time. Stones the shades of reds, yellows, whites and purples carried primordial memories. It was as if I had walked into my own paintings and ambled among the pigments.

A desert experience is mostly a humbling one.
Perhaps it is the lesson in humility I long for.

*

Last night, while watching an Israeli movie, I had a strange sensation - not knowing whether a memory of a specific place in Tel-Aviv was as a result of actually being there or a dream I'd had. I realized, with distress, that my memory

of Israel was mixture of real experiences and dreamed ones; that sometimes remembering replaces the actual event.

A few months after the 6 days war had ended, I went to the West Bank. We were in a state of euphoria after the decisive victory and I was among the many Israelis who went on shopping tours in the newly occupied Jerusalem and Ramalla. When I approached a vendor, I hoped he would read in my body language an invitation to a dialogue. I hoped he would understand that coming to bargain for goods actually meant, I wished for a neighbourly relationship. I wanted him to understand that although we were conquerors we were different. We were not oppressors. We would not humiliate. But what I saw beyond the friendly smiles, and the inconsequential chat, was submission and humiliation. The Arab vendor, with whom I was trying to open a dialogue by bargaining for an embroidered Bedouin dress, saw me as another arrogant conqueror.

More than a decade later on a visit from New York with Maya, I took her to see Jerusalem, Beith-Lehem and the Dead Sea. She was four or five years old, and was impressed by the towns where time stood still, and by the provincial customs of the region. I could sense the same uneasy feeling of “a colonizer” creeping in my bones. We were surrounded by much loved vistas, but while driving eastward through the austere slopes of the Jerusalem mountains, I was extremely uncomfortable. Never again did I venture east beyond Jerusalem.

3.

It seems that in winter when familiar doubts creep in, they are stronger and more persisting. No matter how often I remind myself the pointlessness of discussing myself with myself, I am not able to stop it:

Me: Ignore It.

Myself: I agree.

Me: Neither doubts nor over-confidence should be indulged.

Myself: This is preaching to the converted. How do I stop?

Me: Think of your freedom.

Myself: It is only an illusion of freedom.

Me: you are free to concoct your challenges; free to fail or succeed.

Myself: Free to fool myself into believing that what I do is significant.

Me: Think of the rapture.

Myself: A rapture that comes out of solving problems I invented and that no one cares if and how they are resolved.

Me: This is what it is all about. And making art is as free as it gets.

Myself: Making stuff that nobody needs.

I am not even sure that there are any painting left in me that I find meaningful.

Me: Concave/convex? The memory of water? Substance/absence?

Myself: good titles! but is there anything beyond the title?

*

When I look north-west from the studio's veranda I can see Mount Helen in the near distance. We left in the morning when the sun had not yet dispersed the mist that was covering the valley. The frost on the grass was sparkling. There was ice in the morning air. As we ascended the gentle slope, the mountain, that up to that moment seemed to have been featuring in a two dimensional postcard, assumed a tangible substance. From the summit, I could see the Murlow. From where I stood, the mountain had lost its comforting round posture. From this angle it did not look reassuring at all, but resembled a wild sphinx. The rest of the valley spread underneath like a faded picture of yellowing-green pastures dotted with dark green splashes and red and white squares. Only an odd truck descending the ridge gave the vista an air of reality.

By now, the sun is as high as it gets at this time of the year. These days the sun is less than generous. It circles the sky at a lower altitude and slides down farther north than in summer. Up at the top the ground was covered with long grass. There was grass everywhere; the breeze turned it a shimmering silvery tone. The wind was fierce, coming from all directions, giving the summit a bad-hair-day look. In the slopes the grass took on silver-pink tones against the bluish-grey hues of the distance hills. Brilliant blue stretched out beyond the sky.

Otherwise there was very little colour in the landscape. Everything was tinted light blue. In Bright Earth, Philip Ball singles out blue for a special treatment. It seems that up to the nineteenth century a good blue was hard to find.

Blue was the first synthetic pigment to be developed by the Egyptians about 4500 years ago.
In ancient Greece blue was a kind of darkness.
Linguistically blue was, and still is in some languages, neglected.
It was only in the sixteen century that blue was welcomed into the fold of the fundamental colours – white, black, yellow and red.
It was a century later that the yellow, red and blue were established as the primary colours.

Bluebird, blue heeler, blueberry, blue bottle, bluebell, blue robin, bluegrass, blue gum or Eucalyptus Globulus, blue whale and the blue buck antelope. And then there is blue rinse, blueprint, blue chip, blue ribbon, blue collar, and the folklore character bluebeard. And even more bewildering are blue movie, bluestocking, true blue, the blues, out of the blue, and once in a blue moon.
Blue and white – the colours of the flags of Israel, Finland and Greece.
Blue and yellow – the flag of Sweden.

But why is blue the colour of melancholia?

The blues of space mixed with the yellows of the light rendered the valley a plethora of greens. And it was the spectrum of greens that stayed with me. The colour of the grass silvery bright-green-grey; silvery dull-green-grey; silvery bright-yellowish-green; silvery dull yellowish green; pinkish-grey-green; dove-grey-green; brownish-yellow-green; all these, and more, were the colours of the grass. Lime, Chrome, cobalt, olive, emerald and viridian may not suffice for describing the trees and shrubs in the near distance. A Brownish-olive spectrum and shades of pale blue-green for the ridges beyond.

The words paint a picture of sort. But it remains a mere linguistic exercise.

5.

In her book Reading Lolita in Teheran, Azar Nafisi wrote about the effect of political oppression on the human spirit. I bought her book because the name had conjured up an intriguing image - Lolita and a woman hidden behind a black veil - and found myself engrossed in a fascinating portrait of the early days of the Islamic revolution in Iran. She intertwined stories of young Iranian women with the classic novels of Nabokov, Fitzgerald, James and Austin. Nafisi wrote that one morning a child of a friend came to breakfast terrified. He had had an *illegal* dream. In the dream, he was a teenager kissing his girlfriend. He was panicked!

She described her female students as if they were heroines in one of the novels they were discussing. By exposing the colour of their clothes beneath the robes, she revealed their personalities, dreams and disappointments. One of her ‘girls’ painted ‘splashes of rebellious colour’. And another ‘girl’ had abandoned realism because ‘reality has become so intolerable that all I can paint now are the colours of my dreams.” Her book is both painful and beautiful.

When I lived in New York, I visited Israel regularly. Secretly I hoped that something would ignite a certain hidden world, and I will discover hidden stories

waiting to be released. It never happened. Now as a result of the emotional turmoil the current war has triggered in me, I found in the books I am reading a path that steers me to my past.

In Mazali's 'Maps of Women's Going and Staying', Tahani, a Palestinian woman, who was an Israeli prisoner, told how in her teen years she desperately "wanted to be as Israeli as humanly possible. A total, unsuspected and fully acknowledged member... I wanted to know the land. The actual land, in detail." The land features strong in the Israeli psyche. I was taken aback to read that her need to know the land was exactly the same as mine. That we shared memories of freshly picked oranges and walks along the Yarkon's banks. We also shared a life lived without a mother's tongue.

The language Tahini's mother spoke was English. The language of her surroundings was Hebrew. Arabic, which she called 'myother tongue', she learned at the age of eleven. My mother's tongue was Russian. My father's tongue was Polish. Privately they talked in Yiddish. Together we spoke the language of our surrounding - Hebrew. I begun learning English, which was to become 'myother tongue', at the age of eleven

At age eleven, I used to walk along the banks of the Yarkon river, looking for daffodils that grew wild along the marshy banks. I would pick as many as my hands could hold. On the way back, I would sink my face in the fresh bouquet of white petals and yellow crowns; I would breathe in the sweet perfume, and would skip and hop the long way home.

In the garden, new clusters of daffodils appeared under the tortured-willow, where the earth is covered with decomposing leaves. The Hebrew name for 'daffodil' is 'narcis' – derived from Narcissus. The Myth of Narcissus is about ambiguity. The relationship between the object and its reflection is uncertain. Narcissus contemplates his own reflection, but does not know his own image:

The Myth of Narcissus suppose to be about identity.
But perhaps it talks about the impossibility of identity?

I painted a reclining woman reflected in water. But it felt not quite right. Somehow it felt not quite right to use water as a basis for feminine identity. I covered the reflection. I did not like the clear relationship between the body and its reflected image. I would like the water to become a boundary between worlds rather than a surface that mirrors sameness.

*

In ‘Maps of Women’ Rela Mazali finds an interesting way of entering landscape and memory. The journeys the book describes have stirred in me a slight insight - a faint direction by which perhaps I could explore my preoccupation with memory and place.

In a statement about my work, I wrote:

Working from a studio situated in a middle of the paddock, I reflect on my wandering. I trace journeys made over decades, on other continents, in different cultures and languages. I try to find links; to find visual expressions, which will connect personal and geographical landscape,

Physical and human mobility have provided a context for my artwork. Moving around the world is part of my legacy. As I look back at my family history I see a tension between memories and experiences. When one needs, or is forced to move, fantasies struggle with what is tangible. Images take shape in our minds and we search for them in the new place we call home. These images don’t always correspond to reality. So, being on the move inspires (among other things) a dialogue between fiction and truth, between rest and restlessness, between alienation and attachment. In addition, displacement causes

the landscape to change. This could trigger in some an urge to contemplate the relevance of place.

I have not been able to create artworks that will mirror such thoughts.
Looking at the crude map-drawings of journeys Rela Mazali includes in her book, I suddenly understand where I want to go with my work. I get a brief vision of a solution to memory-scapes.

Heather sent me a beautiful hand made card in which she wrote – time, human-time, cosmic-time, atomic-time, garden-time - thus adding up the memories that blended our time together. A subtitle in the catalogue that supplements her exhibition reads – *nomadic texts from the margins*. In her artworks, words and images interlaced to create a map of suggestions and possibilities.

Heather creates ‘seeding places’. Sam paints ‘the diasporic landscape’. Rivka writes about ‘a voyage to the heart of Senegal’. Their work talks about the sense of place landscape offers. Sam writes, “as [a] viewer looks at [a] painted landscape the painting returns the gaze upon the viewer, inserting upon the landscape a human presence…the person who reflects upon what is shown is thus, in turn, reflected back and identified as the point of origin of the view…” He was born in a refugee camp in Austria. Grew up in Australia. Lived in New York. Now he lives both in Sydney and Berlin. He wishes to go back to his birthplace to acquire “an adult register of the landscape.”

Rivka was born in Israel. Grew up in Israel. Lived in Amsterdam. Now she lives in both New York and Tel-Aviv. After an intense visit to Senegal, where her daughter was living with the Jahanqui clan as a Peace Corps volunteer, she writes: “Geography and its landscape are only secondary to the emotional and sensory adventures that await the visitor…” Enid, as part of her work, had witnessed female circumcision. Rivka who is narrating both their experiences, explains that

an uncircumcised woman has little chance of finding a husband. She describes her stay in Sengal as “a primordial state of being human”, yet “ …the harmonious synchronization of man and nature takes place in a continuous present that stretches both directions to no visible end.”

Heather was born in Boston. She lives in Melbourne. Her comments are in another language. She prefers metaphors. “I dreamt the Alphabet was buried under my house. The text was underground. I memorized vowels in the dark excavated from damp clay”. She says that she no longer cringes as “an American for the dangerous mentality of America. I despair as we all do, but not as an American. Inside I can also remember what has made that country great. Its democracy. Its bill of rights. Its open door. Its vigour. But that was long ago. And of course, I still swoon for lilacs and all that they stand for in my memory”.

Sam writes “after the Great War many people begun to feel edited out of their own time, a process surrounding them in which they had only spectatorial evidence. A new ethos begun by those left out of history…”

When I think memory and landscape, I think of friends like Heather, Sam and Rivka who map their personal histories on a grid, which in turn is superimposed on a broader cultural chart

However, unlike Heather, Sam and Rivka when making art I don’t think in words.

We have found new places, havens and homes, yet the roots of the first home inevitably go deep. How deep?

The meaning of place does not trouble many people, especially if they have always lived there. I once thought that the relationship between people and their place could account for what makes them distinct. Growing up in a country whose identity was shaped by interaction with the environment, I believed that an

Israeli-self was formed predominantly by engagement with the land; that the Australian psyche was shaped largely by uneasiness regarding the Australian landscape; and that the landscape echoes the specific nationhood, as in the case of the aborigines who believe that features of the land were shaped by mythical and historical events.

Today this notion seems too simplistic. Mutual environmental interaction is only a small fraction in a more complex cultural and social dynamic. The term Australian may conceal, along with attachment to the landscape, social and cultural rifts that fix relationship to place. Many Australians can relate to the struggle of Aborigines, to holocaust survivors, and to Palestinian refugees and share a common place of memory rather than of landscape.

An identity seems to be a construction that is shifting by changing circumstances. A person is born or arrives into an established situation and is shaped by its social and environmental forces. Mostly we wish to be an organic part of the place in which we live. And mostly we become that which will get us through.

6.

A winter dawn was breaking over the eastern range. I stayed in bed. The chill entered the room through the spaces between the blind's slats. I lay on my back thinking about the unfinished paintings in the studio. Somehow it seemed unreal. The movements of the brush had nothing to do with me. The resulting images were someone else's vision. This perplexing feeling stayed with me while I ate breakfast. Outside, through the naked branches of the trees the sky was a mass of clouds and rain. The persistent drizzle did not wash away the feeling of alienation I had had since daybreak. I decided to bond with the chooks.

It has been a long time since the last rainy episode of this magnitude, and it was strangely reassuring, if only as a reminder of what a true wet really means.

In the chicken coop, I found six eggs. No wonder, yesterday was winter solstice. The chooks eager to leave their coop did not pay attention to my shrieks of delight. During autumn months they had offered a single egg a day, now, when the sun has returned, their natural cycle tells them it is time to lay again.

Their inner clock is a source of uninterrupted amazement. Every evening, when the last light disappears behind the mountain, I close the chicken coop. but not before I make sure they are roosting in the ‘Hilton’ Leslie had made from a leaking water-tank. Always punctual. Never late for a last gossip before dark makes them docile.

Some mornings I watch them before opening the gate. They scratch, peck, and have their sand-bath. Upon hearing me coming, they would stop any activity and stand next to the gate waiting. During the day the rooster, moving just like Groucho Marx, followed by his waggling ladies, leave a trail of destruction in the garden. Ground covers, new seedlings and weeds are indiscriminately scratched away; newly planted bulbs are dug out. Yet I forgive. I watch them with a smile when they waggle their way across the paddock back to their tin shelter in the late afternoon. In fact they're just about as amusing as the Marx brothers.

When I discovered the burrows the rabbits had dug overnight, I thought of infringement. In the studio, I named the recalcitrant painting of tyre tracks “intrusions”.

7.

This morning, after a bitter cold night, the ground was covered with frost. When the rising sun touched the grass, it looked as if it was sprinkled with crushed crystals. I walked around the contours of the shadows the sun had drawn on the ground, tracing with my foot imagined boundaries on the brittle blades of grass. I spent a long time outlining the shadow cast by the golden elm. As the sun gained

warmth, the contours of the shadow defrosted, awakening a sparkling band of grass. I am troubled by my obsession with making marks. Any marks. Be it on a paper, on canvas, on the computer screen or in the garden.

I continue circling the awakening estate, mulling over the conversations I had with Sam.

We spent the weekend reflecting; talking about our art, current and future artworks, Jewish heritage, melancholia, aging, other artists, other worlds, food, books, menopause, and gossip. It was useful to stop thinking about the current work and look at past, present and perhaps future coordinating points. At first, I felt a bit reluctant to summarize my life, but both Sam and Leslie were adamant; determined to prepare text for Leslie's documentary.

Thus, Sam went back to Sydney, leaving me with three questions to ponder:

1. Let's divide your work into 2 components: desert and the body. In 1967 you were in the Israeli army, in the desert. It was a site of collective and personal trauma. How has the memory of this evolved through your work?

2. The body appears through sticks, rocks, organic forms in landscape and in shadows. If it is a Jewish quality not to depict an image other than through its otherness, how do you inscribe your gender into this?

3. The body in your work passes through shadows into dolls and now into the female nude, over a period of more than thirty years. How has the landscape you have lived in determined these changes?

I am not sure it is for me to answer these questions.

When I try to formulate answers to such questions, I feel as if I am poking my nose into someone else's affairs. As if I am a foreigner in a land whose vocabulary and syntax are beyond me. I prefer to think of the art I make as series of urges rather than realizations of ideas. It is usually the work that takes hold of me, and not me having a hold over the work.

*

The paintings around me have a subject matter. But they are neither stories nor allegories. They just are. They carry meanings which I cannot always read. Women's naked bodies stare at me. I don't paint faces yet I can feel their gaze. They radiate familiarity. They are real.

For Bertolt Brecht realism was a matter of the work's impact on its audience. Thus, an artwork can be realistic for an Australian and not for a South American, and vice versus. What is real for one person may be a fantasy for another. Yet, I find it difficult to imagine aesthetic relativism in regard to the painting I've just finished.

*

Last night, after sunset, the sky radiated in a yellow-orange glow, which was reflected in the approaching cumulus clouds. The light sliced the solid dark-grey mass of clouds, and fanned out to create, what Leslie calls God's fingers.

In such moments, I believe that I live at the end of the rainbow, just where the pot of gold lies. In such moments, my self-importance is a faded memory; my ability to impose change and order is an arrogant metaphor, which stands for a mediocre gardener.

It is a worry. I am becoming an expert in clouds formations.

*

Every morning and every evening, I can feel the sun reasserting its claim on the day. Dawn comes earlier and dusk later. But the days seem colder and the nights seem icier. The out of character rain transformed the chicken coop ground into a vile concoction of food scraps and chicken poo.

Sometimes at nights, with a glass of water in my hand, I walk out to the back veranda and look over the paddock. There are nights when the moon is hidden behind clouds, and I search for familiar silhouettes in the dark space, when I can feel the cold in my eyes and the darkness in my bones, I look toward the light over the fence. The light comes from the neighbouring horse stud. It is in order to fool the horses into believing in uninterrupted daylight. In chicken farms they use artificial light as a way of convincing the chooks that summer is always with us.

In such nights, I don't stay long out of door. I don't like the trajectory my mind launches into because of bare light bulbs and artificially induced environments.

8.

The drought is officially over. The river swells under the carpet of watercress and duckweeds, desperately in need of a good flush. I can even hear its gentle flow on the way to the Hunter River. Perhaps this summer it will be possible to swim in the river again. However, right now, while typing with mittens exposing only the tip of my fingers it is difficult to conceive of a swim in the river.

My mind drifts to the red centre, to the waterhole under the escarpment where I spent delicious hours feeling my body slice the still cool water. I am taken back to the scorched landscape by Tim Winton's Dirt Music. The book has awakened a longing for that landscape. I go back to the pages I wrote, next to the waterhole, leaning on a white trunk of a gum that offered some protection from the hot sun.

From where I sit the reflection is clear. The still water mirror red rugged cliffs and royal blue sky. One large white gum tree, growing out of solid rock, split the picture into two. Now, at the end of the day, the colours are shades of purple. At

dawn - oranges and reds dominate. It is a harsh, bold and unforgiving country. Yet welcoming.

We arrived yesterday after a jarring ride over a serrated dirt road, followed by a fog of orange dust. Today I look for the grooves the vehicle left under the settled dust. I walk along the unfamiliar rock formations, touching the warm stones. Like a blind woman, I let structure and texture be etched into my memory. I let the logic of the place carve inroads in my mind. I wish to understand and to remember.

Red sand. Orange and black rock. Sand and Spinifex. Sand and grey gum leaves. Sand and blue water. bleached dead trees against black rocks. Sand and bleached bones. Pale pink boulders and pale lime-green lichen. I add my marks to the traces left by reptiles and birds. My marks are bold. The surface shatters under the weight of my body. My footsteps are like scars on a smooth red skin.

And then I find my cave. It is an opening in the orange-red jagged escarpment, far above the ground. Beneath it is a vast expanse of spinifex and sand converging with a band of hazy blue sky. The horizon a shimmering assortment of pastel hues.

On the way back to the camp I come across a dry creek. On both sides, spinifex as far as the eye can see. The sand looks soft and inviting. I lay down. My shadow falling nowhere. The sand underneath is hot. Almost too hot. There is only stillness around. I pretend that I occupy no space; that I am witnessing events that happen when no one is watching. A tree breaks a limb. A dingo eats an iguana. An eagle breaks a wing. A lightening starts a fire.

At camp I stay quiet. Soft greyness settles in the cracks of the escarpment. I am covered with fine red dust. It lifts softly into the air around me. A long swim does

not wash away the red veil. Soft red settles in my throat, in the pores of my skin and on my eyelashes.

I try to remember white dunes before their smell carried grief; before the dust that had settled revealed charred nametags.

Once, a long time ago, in a different desert, we followed the dry riverbed, steep walls rising on either side of the sandy path. Our claims of pleasure would echo, reverberating long after we turned a bend in the deep ravine. We could hear it bouncing off the rocky walls when we started climbing a steep trail. We would stop to inspect the place we had just left behind. Ahead a little stream bubbling out of the rock, hidden behind a lush maidenhair shrub. The water cascading across a causeway, enclosing the reflected light in tiny pools. When we got to the top we gasped. For below us stretched rocky slopes dropping into flat sandy plains and small salt-beds that merge with the silvery Dead Sea.

Years later we drove a dirt road that meandered along expanse dry salt lakes. If we would to stick out our tongues, they would have been coated by crusted salt. And than we drove into a mirage, a phantom of shimmering water, reflecting the hazy sun. I took the binoculars to see if I could detect the illusion. Far from it. In fact the movement of the water was magnified, which in turn gave more substance to the colours and texture that hovered over the water. In the hazy distance palm trees. We drove through the illusion of water, the dust covering our tracks, and reached an oasis. A dry lake and three palm trees provided shelter for a lone Bedouin. He offered sweet black tea and dried flat bread and we offered cigarettes and chocolate bars. We shared provisions but not a language. We listened to each other silence. And in silence we parted, he to his camel, we to our Jeep.

As the sun sets, the sun oozes out of stones. I am surrounded by absence.

In The Blue House I read about Russian poets whose blood comprise of words. When they kill themselves the walls are covered with words.

9.

When I enter the studio, the smell of turpentine hits me. I love it. It reminds me I exist. The lingering odour means I continue to exist even in absence. Next I open the door of the combustion stove, pock the black log and am amazed to find a burning fire within its charred embers. There is something heartening about a flame waiting to be released.

*

Behind the trees, where the orchard begins, a flock of ibis picking the damp grass. Among them is a lonely duck fishing for slugs. On a fence post a kookaburra watches the dogs chasing a couple of magpies that pinched their bones. A dozen sulphur-crested cockatoos, on the studio roof, rip the air with their ear-splitting screech. To the east, a noisy crowd of galahs has landed, covering the paddock with pinks and greys. The colours of their bodies a soft backdrop to the blue and emerald body of the peacock that stands erect in their midst. The peacock has returned. After several months of looking for a mate elsewhere, he is back enticing our hens. In the mornings, when I open the coop, he is there wooing the indifferent chooks with his magnificent display of feathers.

Now, he walks tall and proud, momentarily eyeing the birds, and heads straight to the mirror we hanged on a post. There he would stand for hours, facing himself. Next to him red-winged blue king parrots share the honeysuckle bush with the tiny blue honeyeaters oblivious to the commotion.

On other continents, these very birds are a caged attraction.

*

It is cold. The frost lingers. A thin layer of ice covers the water-lilies tub. The ground is hard, resisting the shovel. The birds' song reminds me of mornings in the outback. Perhaps the outback begins at the outskirts of the city. In the winter the landscape seems empty. The light is weak. The only colour on the estate is the yellow flag with which we let the post-person know we have something to say. We live inside - inside the warm house and inside our thoughts.

This time I welcome the journey to Sydney. I could use the interruption. The work is fragmented. Not having an imminent deadline to meet is a double edge sword. On one hand, making art without looming deadlines is devoid of the anxiety to complete unfinished works and to produce. But it breeds other kinds of anxieties, which are detrimental to any creative endeavour.

I left behind Pamuk's 'Black Book' I have been reading. At the university office the only fiction we keep is in Hebrew. I took off the shelf David Grossman's 'Someone to Run With', and was captivated. It tells of an unfamiliar Jerusalem. It exposes painful facts in the life of contemporary Israel. It is youthful yet sorrowful. It is a story about neglect yet it is optimistic. In Grossman's writings I read my own disappointments. In his novel I read his hopes for contemporary teenagers, that they will survive the blindness of their parents and that of the state. He also asks, what happens when a person changes her character for a specific project, would she be able, when the project is over, to be who she was before?

When I lived in Vienna, I spent many nights thinking about the very same question. I felt that some parts of me were 'disengaged' so that I could survive Vienna. As a young mother, I did not let the bleakness of the place to dampen my enthusiasm. When I understood that angst had become my way of life, I left for New York.

Ironically, living in Austria, rather than in Israel, prompted my reflections on the Holocaust. And like David Grossman “I don’t belong to those who believe that the Holocaust was a specifically Jewish event. As I see it, all civilized, fair-minded persons must ask themselves serious questions about the holocaust. These are not Jewish questions. They are universal questions.” The atrocities in the Balkan just a decade ago brought home these very same concerns. I watched on the TV the intensity of the tribal and ethnic hatred, and thought how could it be happening all over again? This time we would not be able to claim that “we did not know the extend of the carnage”. It was happening in the comfort of our living rooms.

In the Black Book Orhan Pamuk poses a similar question to that of Grossman’s. Can someone lose himself, become another person, and then find himself in that other person story? Pamuk is a new discovery for me. I am not sure whether he addresses this question in his other writings. Grossman, on the other hand, has been preoccupied with the issues of damage and repair to the self since ‘See under: Love’. As if he wishes to see the destiny that awaits him, in the Israel that has taken an incongruous identity.

Pamuk is also haunted by his country identity. He condemns his own nation for discarding its Ottoman glory for coca cola, McDonalds and Hollywood. Like Grossman (and myself) he sees contemporary life pushing his country toward an abyss.

Reading the ‘Black Book’ is like playing with Russian dolls. Perhaps it is more like walking in a busy Turkish square full of mirrors that reflect the memories of passers-by. I watch the peacock watching its reflection in the mirror. I will never know the memories he carries that prompt his return every year at the time when the sun begins to press on the night’s edges.

Our paddock is a long way from Istanbul, yet for me it is just as colourful and exciting. Even in its wintry dormant phase. Long shadows are swaying. Branches, just before budding, are glowing yellow. A soft afternoon light illuminates the distance eastern hills that take on an outline of churches and mosques in a Middle Eastern urbanscape.

10.

The artist's task is to save his dream Modigliani

Last night I had a nightmare. In my dream I covered with white gesso the panels that make 'the playground'. When I finished, happy to have large new surfaces on which to paint, I realized that the painting was scheduled to be exhibited.

This month we would have celebrated father's 99th year, had he lived. He died 10 years ago. I dedicated to him a ten meters painting, commissioned by the Sydney Festival - "The Playground: and Urban Detail" - a place in which children play and imagine; a place where dreams and fears create patterns and leave their marks. The painting acted as a bridge between memories of my childhood in Israel and my present preoccupation with being an artist in Australia.

Up to several years ago, I lived in cities. Major cities like New York, Vienna, Sydney and Tel Aviv. When I was a little girl in Tel Aviv I played hopscotch on paved footpaths. When my daughter was a little girl, she built castles in cemented sandboxes in New York. Life in the city was living among jarring opposites and complex tensions. What made city life exciting was constantly juggling beauty and ugliness, intelligence and ignorance, order and chaos, and nevertheless, staying sane.

In the painting, I set out to examine this mixture of forces through the games children play. It was an opportunity to bring father to the studio; to a world he was unable to make his own. It was my way of acknowledging the seeds he had

planted in the child he took to see the meagre collections in the Tel Aviv museums and galleries. It was a tribute to his cultured spirit that had surfaced despite deprived circumstances.

To his silent ache of regret.

When I was young, I used to reassure myself with dreams of other worlds.
He would look at me and his eyes would say – perhaps you will escape; perhaps you will achieve something if you get away from here. But the words he spoke were of motionless reality.

*

A go ahead was given to Bickham Coal to begin digging the bulk sample. It pains me to think of this beautiful valley gutted; raped by greed. It seems that the notion of a shared ‘common sense’ is a fallacy. Some look at our valley and see nature in its glory. Others look at the same spot and see dollar signs. Ironically these two are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

It is frustrating. As an artist, I am not equipped to deal with such issues without becoming an illustrator. How can art respond to future scenarios such as: water from the Pages river, contaminated by coal dust, ends up in the biodynamic farms down stream from the coalmine?

I am so enraged that I write letters to the editors. I write submissions to the relevant government departments. I write letters to ministers, back benchers, assistants and secretaries. I get back polite replies. They infuriate me more than if I did not get any reply at all.

Bickham coal is planning to use vast amount of water a year to suppress the dust. As a matter of fact, three times more than the town uses a year. Yes. We

are in a drought declared zone, but the relevant authorities seem to remember this fact only when cameras are directed at them. The site of the proposed mine is about 100 metres from the river. The hole they wish to dig will go deeper than the riverbed. Have they ever heard of a captured river? The current economic climate and global environmental considerations mean that even if Bickham will get the green light for a full-blown coalmine, it will be a short time operation. We, on the other hand, will end up with a big hole, gathering rainwater and drowning the locals' hopes for a better future.

On the bright side, we might acquire a stunning swim hole.

*

This morning the ground was covered with frost. White and porous just like a web of crystals latticing their way across the paddocks. It was a bitter cold night. The water in the tub outside the studio, and the water lilies it contained were covered with a thin layer of ice. As the sun warmed up the studio windows, the frost melted away. From a certain angle, the traces left behind by the drying drops looked like a fragile lace work. The cool air brought memories of real winters, when even a bright sun would not ease the chill.

I loved waking up to the sight of snow in New York. With the falling snow, certain stillness would descend on the city. I liked watching from the fire escape of my Soho loft the white flakes that covered the oil stained streets, the sidewalks, and the parked cars. Those white flakes would sneak on you. You could not hear them landing. But suddenly you realize that they had transformed familiar objects into awkward shapes. I liked the immobility it created. No cars would find the road. You could only walk, or ski, through the tunnels of white stuff they would pile up alongside the footpath. Once the local shop ran out of provisions, for one day.

However, I disliked it when the snow began to melt. It would turn brown muck with icy patches. I don't care to remember the many time we landed on our bums. Also, I did not like pushing Maya's stroller through a snow blizzard, when the show was so thick that I would not know when I reached my destination.

There is no snow in the valley or in Tel Aviv. Winters in Tel Aviv were wet and you felt it in your bones. Here the winters are dry. Warm days and frosty clear nights. There are cloudless nights when the moon is high in the sky. The light washes over the dew-coated field casting pale shadows of gum trees and sycamores. The Murlow is present. Just like a sated beast of prey. On such nights the place looks like something I dreamed up. I keep my eyes wide open. I can feel my pupil dilating with the effort to see beyond the shadows. At times I fear that if I will blink the estate will be swallowed by the Murlow.

In the ink colour sky I detect a unique alliance – Mercury, Venus, Mars, Saturn and Jupiter. Venus and Jupiter the brightest of the five. For the last few days Venus has been very close to earth. Just after sunset, the star has been twinkling bright just above the horizon. These days the beauty of the nights is a celestial poem.

On one such crisp night, Luba, Asher, Leslie and I were standing in the middle of the paddock gazing at stars. It was a moonless evening. Pitch dark. The dark dome above us was studded with stars. On such nights it is easy to understand the not so ancient conviction that the sun circles us and the earth remains fixed. Tonight the ink-blue sky looked as if it was made up of a series of meticulous paintings, stitched together in such a way that the seams were invisible.

Oblivious to the cold, we were excited to see that the Milky Way was indeed milky. We pointed at the various constellations, forgetting in our excitement that it was too dark to discern at what the finger was pointing. Yet we understood each other's joyous exclamations.

- Here are the pointers!
- so there is the south!
- These stars are in fact galaxies, and this shining one ….
- Where? Which one?
- Can't you see? next to the man and the emu!
- Where?
- Just where the milk is thick! Can't you see the head? Shoulders?
- Oh. Do you know that the andromeda nebula is visible only between October and January?

Inside, the fire was wine-red. We were cramped around the kitchen-counter and over a glass of wine, marvelled at the day packed with visual stimulation - the awe-inspiring Wallabadah rock still a vivid image and our clothes smelled of sulphur emitted by the cracks in the Burning Mountain. I read a poem by Ronny Somek and allowed the words to drift in the warm air, ready to be plucked like a ripe pear:

In Response to a Question:
When did your peace Begin?
On the wall of a café near the camp for new immigrants
they hang a photo of Ben Gurion and his windswept hair
and next to it, in a similar frame, the pancake face
of Umm Kulthum. It was '55
side by side, a man and a woman, they must be
bridegroom and bride.

Luba and Leslie did not understand. Asher and I explained that Umm Kulthum was a popular Egyptian singer, banned in Israel.

*

The afternoon air is cool. A pile of gathered leaves, trapped by the wind, is whirling just above the ground. The dogs are hypnotized. The wind lets go of leaves in the margins, and they tumble down in a slow motion. Mishka tries to grab a moving leaf and disturbs the arrangement. I think of butterflies. The turquoise butterflies that come with spring. And the colourless ones that flap in anxious stomachs.

Leslie walked over. His beaming face held a promise of delight. He took hold of my hand and gently directed me to the back of the studio. The sky was grey. The light was grey. The air was cool. The feeling of his hand in mine was warm. While we were approaching our destination, I remembered a similar situation not long after we had met. We lived in a little apartment that had a small veranda overlooking a busy street in Tel-Aviv. On the veranda, in pots of different sizes and shapes we planted several varieties of herbs and plants. I was busy doing something when Leslie came over, enthusiastically took hold of my hand, and gently directed me toward the veranda. “Let’s have a walk in the garden,” he said. Even though the plants looked sad, it was one of the most wonderful nature walks I had ever done.

Remembering this anecdote, I smiled and squeezed his hand. We reached the back of the estate, where next to the fence, hidden among the wild fennel was a large echidna. I saw my first echidna while coming down the Burning Mountain. Upon seeing me, it rolled into a pointed orb and pretended not to be. I could not tell whether it was a female or a male. Apparently the female echidna courts several males concurrently. The one that beats his rivals gets to join his prickly needles with hers.

We stood there looking at the confused creature. I could hear the song of birds, the rustle of leaves and swaying of branches in the gathering wind. I could hear the faint sound of the distance highway. I thought of Thoreau, and how he

rejoiced in the sounds he would hear in Walden. He wrote, “I love a broad margin to my life.” Perhaps, I wondered, my life consists only of broad margins.

SPRING

Painting is the silence of thought and the music of sight – Orham Pamuk

1.

Spring arrives every year at the same time and in the same way. Yet it is always sudden and exciting. Everything seems to have acquired a complexion of optimism. It is a season of appearing and vanishing, as well as disappearing and emerging. Overnight grass and clover have regained their dominance over the frost bitten brown paddock. While I blink the wooden veins of bare trees acquire a green blush. A snake is out, and then disappears in a flash in the thicket next to the river. Birds materialise out of trees, and vanish as mysteriously as they appear.

There are many things I want to record in words - large issues, big changes, profound thoughts. But when I finally hit the keyboard I don’t feel like writing about brush strokes loaded with self-doubts, the lack of common-sense in otherwise a wonderful world, or my thoughts on the latest book I have been reading. Instead I wish to write about the subtle shifts of everyday life; about cool October mornings filled with the scent of honeysuckle; about the taste of freshly picked strawberries; about incongruous large pink cacti flowers; about hundreds of little red wrens and the racket they make at dawn next to the bedroom window.

*

Today Miles Davis’s trumpet puts me in the appropriate mood. The music seeps into the cool evening air. I follow the tempo with the brush. I look for regularity

when the beat is unpredictable. I wish I could dance, instead my body discovers the movement hidden in the texture on the canvas. I wish I could sing. Instead my hand discovers a tune hidden in the mixture of ultramarine blue, burnt umber and white.

‘The memory of water’ is almost finished. I find myself hypnotized by the section of ebbing water. I think it is very beautiful. I worry that beautiful is just pretty.
Is there a place for the just beautiful in the contemporary world of art?

In a letter to David Hockney, Larry Rivers asked him whether he would prefer to have his work thought as beautiful or as interesting. In response Hockney said “I’d rather have it thought beautiful. It sounds more final. It sounds as if it did something. Interesting sounds on its way there, whereas beautiful can knock you out.”

Modern European artists wished to destroy the beauty ‘formulated’ by the Greeks and expressed by the Renaissance artists. The Impressionists and later the Cubists got caught in the problem of what is beautiful, and instead of doing away with ancient values as they wished, they ended up merely shifting them. In the 1940’s and 1950’s the American Avant-Garde artists believed that they, free from the weight of European culture, found the answer. They simply denied that art had anything to do with beauty. They argued that they were making art that was devoid of any association with the ‘dreaded’ beautiful. Barnett Newman claimed that his art was free of “the impediments of memory, associations, nostalgia, legend, myth, that have been the devices of western European paintings.” And finally, Postmodern artists argue that they critically redirected the tradition of the beautiful by revising the understanding of the past.

Back to square one - in a world that lies beyond theory what is the significance of beauty?

In the world of art, theories come and go. Ideas about the beautiful have been in a state of flux for over a century. Yet, ‘the beautiful’, as ephemeral as she is, lingers on, perhaps bemused by attempts to destroy, negate or ignore her.

*

In preparation for Powell’s address to the United Nations, a blue cover was thrown over Picasso’s Guernica that was hanging in the room where he was to address the world. Apparently, an angry horse is unpalatable when justifying a call to arms. The veiled black and white artwork shattered any hope left in me that art could make a difference.

“Let’s face it,” I said to myself, “artworks are a decorative means that allows their owners to display a worldly status. When a work of art does not go nicely with the curtains, it is removed. “

The Guernica is not one of those artworks that began with a bang that lights up the sky for a brief moment and disappears never to be resurrected. Rather it is an artwork that gradually came to prominence, driven by its own stamina and social context. When it was first exhibited, Picasso’s painting was just one among many events that took place in Europe in 1937. A prominent Spanish artist commenting by means of a huge mural on the atrocities of the time, most certainly attracted much attention. But it took a long time, a gradual appreciation of the forces that propelled the making of the painting, for the Guernica to achieve its status as an historical monument.

2.

I wrestle with Sebald’s poems in ‘after nature’ while Glenn Gould plays “not Bach.” His music pierces the air, but neither he nor the bright morning can dispel Sebald’s melancholic world. It is a world full of messages in some secret code,

which I don't always manage to crack. Humans' achievements are tiny, to the point of insignificance. No sense of purpose. I look around. I am proud of our trivial achievements on the 'estate'. I am also quite content with my artistic efforts. I know they are insignificant in relative terms, but I have to trust their worth, otherwise I am off to join Sebald. Sebald wrote about a painter who lived through the horror of the 30 years' war and lost his eyesight. In the poem he described a lifeless white world, which was all that the artist could see with his eyesight lost.

On my last trip to Sydney I took the Ulan road, which is framed by pink and white gum trees emerging out of orange earth. I stopped next to a place where water had etched its way deep into the soil, creating moon-like scapes. I walked the shallow canyons that smelled of dust. Silence. An odd bird in the distance. A light breeze was conducting an audiovisual symphony - rustling leaves caught in the rays of a fading sun. I wished I could stay and take in the strange scenery, but the approaching dusk convinced me otherwise.

I stopped in Mudgee for coffee. Across the road a sign "blind artist at work today". Unfortunately the gate was closed. The woman at the café told me that usually he'd leave the studio at five. I sat gazing at the sign, and tried to imagine the tactile painting he must produce. When I paid, the woman showed me a crude 'closed' sign decorated with flowers, the kind found at country towns gift shops, which the blind artist had made.

A couple of weeks later, we took our water bottles, put on walking boots and off we went. In my mind, we were already walking the ravines below Ulan road. But it took us few hours of driving in the wrong direction in search of an illusive park, a lunch and a visit to the blind artist, before we reached the place. The harsh elements had shaped the sandy surface in the form of ancient temples and palaces. Deep in the ravine - land erosion at its worst, a surreal-architectural structure at its best. The sound of the water cascading between the sandstone

stalagmites reverberated just like the sound emanating form the walls of an empty shell that holds the sound of the sea waves.

Sounds and smells definitely contribute to the visual experience. But it is the sense of vision that dictates the superlative we add to define an experience. Breathtaking view, grand vista, majestic ravine, awe-inspiring mountain – can these adjectives be part of a blind man's vocabulary?

I think back to the blind artist. Sense of vision is tightly linked to the arts of painting and drawings. Although I just saw a room full of paintings executed by a blind man, I find it difficult to comprehend the making of two-dimensional works without vision.

What kind of "visual" traces do things leave in the mind of the blind?
I saw him making lines without hesitation. He made boundaries between sky and field. He translated the shapes into whatever corresponded to him in his field of perception. Yet, I didn't understand what line, colour and form would mean to him without vision?

I did not ask. Because I could not tell him that for me the urge to paint comes from a need to see certain images evolve; to watch paradoxes materialize.
That I make art not only because I need to, but because I want to see the kind of art I do.

*

Sebald writes about emptiness and frostiness. His writing is powerful. He sails through the bleakness of European history using a sparse and simple language. Reading him in this setting, enclosed by the peaceful shadows of the Liverpool ranges, is like taking a cold shower on a winter morning. I check my eyesight, alternatively looking at the elegant words and the mountains in the distance.

The scope of damage done by war is immeasurable.
The horror - a visual artist with no visual means.

3.

Colours win you over more and more. A certain blue enters your soul. A certain red has an effect on your blood pressure…

Henri Matisse.

In the paddock, we have 4 large planters, which Leslie cut out of an old ten thousand gallon water-tank. One is dedicated to herbs. The other three have become containers for primary colours. In the yellow planter, I planted daffodils, poppies, calla lilies, Japanese rose, Jerusalem sage, Spanish broom, a grevillea and a dwarf wattle. In the red planter - poppies, Jacobean irises, lilies, gladiolas, dahlias, a tea tree, a grevillea and a dwarf bottlebrush. In the blue planter - 'love in the mist', Dutch irises, Russian sage, lavenders, salvias, a wisteria and other bulbs and shrubs whose names escape me.

According to Alexander Theroux, blue is the rarest colour in nature, and America's favourite colour. Yellow, is linked to the sun, and red, a child's first 'favourite' colour, is the most popular colour of all.

In my list of primary colours blue is the colour I use to create space; the colour of the sky and the abyss, shadows and royalty. The colour of school uniform and distant mountains. It is the colour of the numbers tattooed on the arms of holocaust survivors, the colour of ash, and the tongue of the lizard. Deep water and melancholia. Parrots and the Israeli flag. There is blue-cheese, blue movies, and blue Arabs who roam parts of the Sahara.

Yellow is the colour I use for painting light; of starving lawn, and of shrubs lacking in iron. Yellow is also for illumination, wisdom, lemon and butter. Tara's tennis balls and the fabric star Jews had to place on their sleeves. The colour of our

cottage and Indian curry. Leslie' new shoes and hay. Jealousy and healing. Yellow wrens and yellow cranes. Then there is yellow fever, yellow river, yellow sea and yellow submarine. Yellow pages and yellow press.

Red is the colour I paint the blank canvas with - the ground from which the image emerges; it is the colour of blood and tomatoes, of love and death, of strawberries and Chinese lanterns. Stop signs and Catholic ceremonial dress. Exciting, aggressive, and the colour of a girl's first shoes. The colour of my car and Matisse's studio. Iron in the rock, menstruation and fire. And then there are Redbacks, red lines and red lights. The red army, the red brigades, the red guards and red robins.

*

The peach trees are in bloom. Most other fruit trees glow with the yellow of just before budding. The buds on the Judas's tree and the wisteria give the north-west corner of the garden a purple hallow. Yellow daffodils, red poppies and blue anemones are blooming in the 'primary colours' planters. Honeyeaters have been lured by the delicate Grevillea's flowers, and resident bees are busy at the cherry trees. Finches, robins, assortment of parrots, kookaburras, wagtails, and magpies dwell on tree branches and fence-posts competing with the chooks for the worms and other insects. The chorus of birdsong is entirely different to the one we heard only a few weeks ago.

I spread rotting hay in the vegetable patches. In my mind I imagine separating the straw to reveal the soil into which new seedlings will go. The studio is sheltering a variety of seedlings at two-leaf stage. My imagination is working overtime drawing orderly raised beds in which the tiny seedlings will mature into fruit-bearing plants. For in my imagination each plant retains its individuality, and yields until the first frost. For in my imagination there is no mess or decay only an abrupt secession. Through the window I see the goats. They are shedding, and

they look graceless. Part of me wants to take a brush to their coat. But I have to let go of the urges to linger outdoors.

4.

I made small black and white sketches for a six metres commission. “The Ways of Water” is a quartet portraying three worlds – underwater, surface and reflection. I ordered the four panels and made mental lists of water-scapes I should observe next week on my visit to Mootawinji. I was already there. I smelt decomposing dry gum leaves seeping from between cracks in the large boulders. I touched hold on to hot surfaces on the way for a swim in a rock pool. By the time I’d get back the canvases should be ready.

*

It is 4 am. The torch cuts a bright circle in the moonless night. The indigo dome above me is dotted with bright sparkling stars. When I first opened my eyes in this ungodly hour to the sound of an angry wind, I looked up and wondered whether the display of galaxies existed just to add splendour to the night sky.

I lie in the swag surrounded by silhouetted ranges. The huge rocks are more ancient than I could imagine. But their stillness is deceptive. Even as I ponder their antiquity they are in motion, changing themselves and their surrounding. The gorges have been shaped by wind, rain and sun. The weather has turned large rocks into smaller stones, and pebbles into dust. The outer surfaces become sand grains, which are blown around, colliding into each other and then landing on the ground. And the wind I hear is making more sand, that in time will turn into sandstones.

I crawled out of the swag, found my boots and set off to climb the nearby range. I anted to see sunrise above the awesome display of cliffs. The moon was like a

silver opening in the great ark of the dark sky. I tried to hold onto the nightscape before the sun dispersed the ambiguity of the colours. The golden orb to the east was emerging slowly, covering the landscape in soft pinks. I liked the idea that where I stood only birds and crawling insects could see me.

An ancient semi-arid land, its skin scorched by unforgiving sun; its surface etched by rivers digging canyons and creating bizarre formations in their wake.

How did explorers like Sturt manage to cross that land on foot?
I can imagine how scary it would be to run out of water on a hot day.
But the scarcity of water is what shapes the outback; what makes the light just a bit stronger, the air clearer, the vista so powerful and the sky so generous.
Out here, surrounded by aridity it is hard to believe in culture, in laptops, in electric kettles or in skyscrapers. It is hard to remember Middle-East feuds, and it is impossible to trust haunting images of the unsettling beauty of the World Trade Center wreckage.

Nothing but the awe-inspiring emptiness around me.

Perhaps the seduction is that, out here, I don't even know what questions to ask. Out here, where clouds are hovering just above the next hill, I let go of reason and control for lack of boundaries.

Later in the gorge the rock pools are dry. No waterscapes to remember. On top of the escarpment, we need both knees and hands to climb up a conglomerate of rocks. Sometimes we need ropes to help us descend a steep slope. Sometimes we squeeze through gaps as narrow as a needle's eye.

The place is incomprehensive. Forever challenging.

5.

When November comes, the sun regains its high place in the sky and the soil loses the untarnished quality it acquired during the winter. In April, when the first frost bites the grass, the soil stays warm and soft for a while longer. Now the reverse is true. Even though the frostbitten grass is coming to life, the soil is still hard and cold. Each morning, as I follow the usual route of my morning stroll around the estate, I can feel the frost leaving the ground and the soil becoming softer, and smell November in the air.

How does November smell?
It is the smell the arrival of summer in Sydney.
It is the smell of wood burning in Munich.
It is the smell of snow in New York.
It is the smell of a wet winter in Tel-Aviv.

The sense of smell is a strange kind of seeing, wrote Fernando Pesoa, it conjures up sentimental landscapes:

The smell of cut grass = making hay on a kibbutz in the Yizra'el Valley; the rugged coastline of Wales; bright green moss in crevices of rocks in Woodstock.
The smell of newly stretched linen = an artist village on the southern slopes of Mount Carmel; a castle in the Austrian Alps…
The smell of oil paint = pushing a baby carriage over the cobblestones of Vienna's narrow streets, in search of primary colours; turpentine tree in the blue mountains.
The smell of moist earth and rotting organic matter = picking cyclamens among rotting pine needles on the ground of the Jerusalem forests.
The smell of the seashells = sand castles on a Mediterranean beach; walking the tide line on an isolated East Hampton beach.
The smell of coffee = gallery hopping in Soho, one hand supporting a brown-

paper-shopping bag the other holding Maya's stroller; waves crushing against dark rocks on a beach in Yaffo.

The smell of morning filled with the scent of honeysuckle…

The smell of crushed dry eucalyptus leaves…

The smell of dust in hot air…

*

The chief obstacle to a woman's success is that she can never have a wife.
Anna Lea Merritt

I have shut myself in the studio with six metres of primed linen. And with a set of brushes in my hand, I conduct the four panels, willing them to become a masterpiece.

An almost impossible deadline means that I cannot let the painting take over. I make sure that in all stages I am in control. Usually I will let a painting get away, so that it will take me to uncharted territories; so that I can force it back to where I want to go. I enjoy the battle of wills. I am not always victorious. Not this time, though. Many phases are still tentative, yet I don't have time for failures. My body is tense. I am working against the grain. There is not much time to let the image mature naturally. And since I don't follow a preconceived mental picture - a vision to which I must adhere - every move is like walking on thin ice.

*

In 'The Commissariat of the Enlightenment', Ken Kalfus describes Russia as a country of disillusioned peasants, commissars obsessed by emerging new media, and con artists. He steers around historical figures, and stages implausible events to make political points, which are extremely amusing.

We meet them first in a remote village where Tolstoy is in the process of dying. What transpires is probably the first major media circus the world had seen. Kalfus is not concerned with being historically accurate. Instead Lenin is selling the Revolution, professor Vorobev is selling his technique of embalming, and an Englishman is proposing to manufacture an array of Tolstoy's merchandise such as plates, pins, children's school bags and "perhaps a line of home shoe-making implements".

The protagonist is an amoral, self-righteous antihero. Kalfus explores his idealism with sarcasm and a sense of humour. When an old peasant realizes that the village people are about to be massacred, she begs "Baron Bolshevik, have mercy on us". The Commissar tells her not to worry that it won't hurt, and promises: "This will be a great day for you, one of the best."

Kalfus uses his reflections on Russia before and after the Revolution to write about the relationship between the masses and culture, in particular the fascination with the new medium, film: "Although none had ever been to the cinema, they understood that within the camera some process was working to make them stand as tall as a house all over Europe." He lets the protagonist lament the possibility of recording speech on film. "Silence is a more powerful medium, engaging the imagination with what is not said, adding a larger than life presence to figures…speech is too specific. " He includes a recipe for an image-ruled empire. "This is how to do it: either starve the masses of meaning or expose them to so much that the sum of it would be continually unintelligible."

Our psyche is continuously massaged and manipulated. Most of us cannot complete a thought without referring to some manufactured slogan or image.
I dig out a letter I wrote to Fitzroy about the very same issue –

… when making art contemporary artists need to consider the effect of images that flood the mind. In the past, the visual memory of a person was limited to a fragmented

heritage and direct personal experiences. A personal story was created by fitting together pieces of a memory. Today our visual memory is littered. We can no longer distinguish between personal experience and what we saw on the television (although one can claim that what we see on television is part of the experience). It is difficult for any image to stand out and become a particular visual metaphor or an inspired poem.

In the article you sent me Lodge is quoted as suggesting that poetry is "man's most successful effort to describe qualia…." and the novel is the "most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time".

I thought that since scientists have replaced the philosopher, the Platonic hierarchy – poetry being the most superior practice – was passé. So now we have a scientist (Lodge) reasserting the ancient pecking order

.

The problem of explaining qualia is the problem of explaining consciousness. To say that poetry and novels are the most successful attempt by humans at describing colour, smell, pain, feelings of nostalgia, the grandeur of music, the rush of adrenalin or wetness, is to exclude. It is also, I think, a failure to recognize the role that images and by extension, the imagination play in the formation of our consciousness.

Dante in the purgatory wrote "Then rained down into the high fantasy". For him fantasy is a place where images rain down from somewhere outside himself. He asks "O imagination, you who have the power to impose yourself on our faculties and our wills, stealing us away from the outer world and carrying us off into an inner one…what is the source of the visual messages that you receive, if they are not formed from sensations deposited in the memory?"

He spoke of the imagination as if it were a vessel containing encoded visions. He tried to define the role of the imagination, in particular the visual part of his fantasy that, for him, preceded verbal imagination. Having a high opinion of himself, Dante claimed a direct relationship between his vision and divine inspiration. More humble writers (and artists) construe a kind of a process that, even if it does not originate in heaven, certainly goes beyond human intention and control.

In “Godel, Escher, Bach”, Hofstadter deals with this very problem. But for him the real problem a writer faces when wishing to convey a certain idea is choosing an image. For Italo Calvino “The poet’s mind, and at a few decisive moments the mind of the scientist, works according to a process of association of images. The imagination is a kind of electronic machine that takes account of all possible combinations and chooses the ones that are appropriate to a particular purpose.”

Arguably the imagination’s idiosyncratic language is, as its name suggests, image base. Most traditional philosophers show hostility to the idea of mental imagery. Among scientists and psychologists the debate continues. Yet, artists have no doubt that imagery is involved in creating works of art. So it is a sad state of affairs when the most successful way in which to describe images is by means of words, as Lodge claims.

And where do motion pictures figure in the scheme of things?

Why this need to create hierarchy? When qualia or other human experiences are concerned, some verbal descriptions are successful and others are not; some paintings are successful and others are not; some movies are successful and others not.

Most of us know intuitively how the imagination works. Shouldn’t we rather concentrate on using it?

Hanna.

6.

Daylight saving has begun. The paddock that turned completely green after the last frost is covered with Patterson Curse. A purple-green expanse is a pretty sight, but I need to remind myself that in this case the colour purple is the mark of a noxious weed. Another introduced species turned pest.

Leslie is committed to eradicating the Patterson Curse. As soon as the delicate flowers appear, he would mount the ride-on and slash all plants within an inch of

the ground. New growth should exhaust the plants. Next year, when they remerge, Leslie will be waiting, hoe in hand. The plants will never get to reproduce since they will never bear seeds. Sounds good in theory. Yet every spring the purple hue returns to the paddock.

*

For the last few evenings it has been almost impossible to come inside. Shadows intensify, greens deepen, the light breeze turns the leaves of the gum trees silver side up, and the flowers on bottlebrush trees shine in the last light. For a brief moment the shimmering silver and the glowing reds look like birthday decoration. Next I watch twilight draining the colours out of the valley and surrounding hills, painting everything in shades of grey.

Short walks around the studio reveal that last year dahlias, cosmos, love-in-the-mist, and other flowers whose name escape me, have self-seeded. The cacti are flowering and tomato seedlings are emerging in the most unlikely places. In the studio I watch the seedlings I raised. They are past four leaves stage and need to go in the ground. They are a constant reminder of the passage of time. However, the gardening zeal I should be feeling right now is hidden among the tubes of oil paint. Every time I get ready to plant the seedlings, the smell of turpentine, linseed oil and freshly painted canvases hauls me back to the easel.

I wish to concentrate on the canvases, but there is always something appealing outside. And now it is a ferocious wind that wreaks havoc in the yard, and a rain that defies gravity and draws horizontal white lines in the grey air.

*

Everywhere there is a racket of cockatoos. Hundreds of the yellow-crested creatures are dotting the landscapes along the highway. They look like giant

white exotic fruits dangling from the tall eucalyptus trees. A screeching flock, flying high in the blue sky, is crossing our line of vision. “Just like interferences on the TV screen” Leslie says.

“Is it a flock of cockatoo?” I asked, in my mind composing the sentences to record the event.
“No. it is a screech of cockatoo; a kafuffle of galahs; a swoop of swallows; a laughter of parrots; a murder of crows; an ecstasy of larks.”
“How about a tribe of magpies, a crowd of sparrows, and a mob of honeyeaters?” I asked as I look for the appropriate terminology to depict the birds’ life on the estate.
“No way!” says my grumpy husband in his Received English accent, “a mob of kangaroos! ‘Tribe’ and ‘crowd’ are reserved for human”.

But I insist on talking about crowds of magpie that have invaded the paddocks, and about a tribe of sparrows nesting in the roof of the cottage.

*

Sometimes when I construct a sentence I have the sensation that the words belong to somebody else. In fact, I could be unwittingly using a sequence of words I read somewhere. I don’t have this sensation when writing in Hebrew, where the grammar and syntax are in my bones. Yet, writing in Hebrew seems somehow unnatural, because the thinking and the experiencing I write about have taken place in the context of the English language. I would rather struggle with the syntax than create distance between me and the text by writing it in Hebrew.

Perhaps my difficulty in constructing sentences is not because I have a non-English background, but because writing is a difficult craft. Perhaps I shouldn’t have been irritated when, at an opening of Kurt Vonnegut’s drawings in New York, he looked horrified when I told him I dabbled in writing. “But writing is

difficult” he exclaimed. I was enraged. “And painting is easy?” I whispered, but he’d already turned to another admirer.

To compose a meaningful sentence I struggle with never-ending possibilities; putting in writing a thought or a reflection is a constant confrontation with my own shortcomings. At times the words I write seem meaningless. All I write is about an obsession with the changing garden and about a tedious artistic struggle. Both are cyclical and not worth repeating. I am cataloguing my flaws and perhaps also some virtues. I can just about imagine myself, as an old woman, reading these words, and I am not sure I like the idea that what I write about will end when I will longer be able to experience the things I write about.

The journal is an ongoing dialogue between me and myself. To make it public is to revise it, and to disengage from it. I feel reluctant; reluctant to edit my life so that it could charm others.

Every year I go public with my artwork.
But there is something transitory about exhibiting art works, whereas a published word seems to me finite.

As an artist I wish for dignity, for an acknowledgement that I exist outside my own head. I make an effort not to hoard humiliations.
Publishing the writing might disrupt the course.

*

Summer is almost here.

The river is dry. The occasional puddles do not offer solace even to the breathless dogs. Only a few years ago, I did not walk the Pages River up-stream, because it was difficult to negotiate the deep pools. Today, the riverbed is a sad sight. The bleached stones and the dry weeds that coat them with a thin

paper-like white blanket put me in a state of dismay; it makes the idea of the coalmine down the road even more outrageous. I read Patrice's book 'The River' and I am convinced that everybody who lives in the river's catchments should read it. I wrote a 'book review' and sent it to the local papers:

…In 1957 Doris Lessing wrote "We are all of us made kin with each other and with everything in the world, because of the kinship of possible destruction." Nowadays thanks to technology we have the visual kinship of watching floods, droughts or fire break-outs all over the country. Patrice Newell's book 'the River' portrays the kinship created by the vicissitudes of the Pages River.

'The River' is an emotive story of a relationship between a woman, who is a mother, a wife and a farmer and her surroundings. In a straightforward style of writing she invites us to enter her life in 'Elmswood' Gundy, and shares with us her dreams, achievements and disappointments.

I have to confess that I was envious reading about walking up and down gorges, or swimming in waterholes I can only dream of visiting. For Patrice Newell walking the gullies and exploring the nooks and crannies of the banks was only one way of knowing the river. She meticulously researched archives and personal records to put together an historical journey.

At times the book reads like an historical novel following a war hero or an outlaw mother. At other times it is full of suspense. In the middle of a stormy night we follow her out of bed to save a pump. As in a good suspense story, she is separated from the house by the gushing river. Will she make it to the muddy road before her young daughter wakes up to the sound of rolling thunder and the sight of an empty house?

The book is full of anecdotes that are familiar to anybody who lives on the land. It is about the sorrows of breeding cattle. It is about the politics of growing olives.

Above all it is a voice of commonsense reminding the ones who take for granted water pouring out of the tap. It is about the scarcity of the fluid of life.

Sometimes books can focus our attention on a country, as did the books of J. M. Coetzee. Although Newell's book is a tale of a minor river most people have never heard of, it is a tale of many rivers in Australia and the world around. Her book might just be the one to focus our attention on a river – on a contemporary burning issue for which we might not have enough water left to quench.

I feel the river's presence day and night. It plays on my imagination the most when it rains. When I lie in bed, just before sleep takes over, I can almost hear a light breeze rustling the Casuarinas' branches. I can almost hear rainwater seeping into the riverbanks and gushing toward the south.

The last rains brought some relief to the dry river. Up-stream where the river bends and cascades over watercress and pebbles I found the stone which I like sitting on, watching. I could feel the stone vibrating with the pulse of the river. I put my head to it. I could hear the sound of waves breaking within the rock. I sat and listened. The reality around me was dense – the water, the gathering clouds in the distance, the cool breeze pushing ripples across puddles.

On the way back the sun dapples down through the needle-like leaves of the trees. I collected few stones to mark the day, but their colour had changed by the time I got home.

Back in the studio I could still hear the evocative sound enclosed in the rock. I faced the canvases that constitute the Way of Water. On one of the panels I had arranged a circle of stones surrounded by water. I listened to them, and with the brush tried to follow their muted resonance.

7.

The population of magpies on the estate has reached a plague proportion, and a new group of honeyeaters has taken residency in the front garden. Their dawn chorus makes a mockery of my efforts to slide back to dreamland. I stay in bed listening to the symphony of different harmonies, and try to understand their chat. Above the morning opus, I could hear a solo bird calling "boker tov"!

Outside, the dew had painted the roof of the studio white. The night's cool air had descended from the Murlow, shielding the valley with a soft mist. I could see the fog slowly lifting off, revealing a clear day. It would be a bright warm day. The locals say that three successive fogs bring rain.

To the north, our field of native grass and weeds is separated from the road by regular iron-bark posts bound together with wire. The fence serves only as a visual barrier between the dirt road and us. Intersecting the five acres are remnants of fences that once served to control horses and cattle. We use the sagging wooden posts to mark the orchard and the goat's yard.

To the west, our 'ranch' is separated from the horse-stud by three efficient fences. To the east by two – ours, and the neighbour's electric fencing. The fences reflect the way landholders use the land – to mark private property and to control animals. You fence to keep your livestock in. You fence to keep others' livestock out. Across the country, unfenced land is a rarity. Even the vast arid planes of central Australia are fenced. And there is a long fence to keep dingo out or in – depending on which side of the fence you are. And there are invisible fences marking the boundaries between white and black.

In my mind I paint a fence interrupting an image of trees reflected in water. I sketch several possibilities.

I think of reflections as interrupted images, and of the water not only as the surface which mirrors a world, but also a layer separating two worlds.
I let go of the fence. It is too literal – trees and timber. And, I must confess, painting ‘a fence’ is aesthetically uninteresting.

8.

‘The ways of water’ is completed. Somehow I need to put the four panels together and see if they work as one continuous painting. The studio is very large. The structure of iron bark and tin used to be a stable, home to eight horses. We gutted the inside and suspended a wooden floor. The walls were covered with white colour-bond, leaving the wooden posts exposed. It is a fusion of rustic and hi-tech. The openings in the walls that served as doors for the horses, were turned to windows. I have enough room for four large easels, a rack in which to store the finished artwork, so that I am not influenced by past mistakes. I pin to boards photographs I have taken. I hang sketches that are relevant to current and future artworks. I also have a “thinking room” where I keep my books and write these words. It also serves as a guest room. But very little wall space to hang large works.

Leslie stretched a steel wire across the studio between the ironbark posts, and hung the painting like clean clothes out of the washing machine. For over two months my world was confined to four large rectangles, with hardly any reflection or examination. So, with apprehension, I looked forward to seeing if the panels worked together and complied with my original intentions.

I held my breath. It was a waterscape of grasses, stones and floating twigs, through which reflections of trees, and the ground under the surface of the water, intermingle together. What I saw rendered my earlier trepidations irrelevant. Yet they remained suspended in the atmosphere. So I asked Leslie how he felt about

the painting we had just hung. He looked at me bemused and said he did not understand my doubts.

I celebrated with an open studio for the community to view the painting before it was due to leave home. This is the second time I have held an open studio. The first time was not long after we had moved to live in the village. I decided to show my work before it was exhibited in Sydney. It was a difficult body of works - the ‘dolls’ series disturbed many viewers.

To help engage with the work I offered a recent correspondence between Heather and myself:

Dearest Heather,

You were correct to argue that the exhibition be named. I finally made up my mind and decided on Echoes. What follows is the text that will accompany it:

A year ago I moved from Sydney to a small rural village. My studio is a very large renovated stable located in the middle of a paddock, and is encircled by part of the Great Dividing Range. The intrusive sound of the railway that runs alongside one edge of the property, echoes off the hills, and keeps me linked to the world at large, and to my artwork. Once the train has passed, the silence is even more pronounced, and it is then that other, unnatural sounds intrude, bringing urban life into nature, the past into the present.

Thus from my rural studio I trace journeys made over decades, on other continents, in different cultures and languages. I try to find links. The artworks act as a link between memories of lives I lead in other parts of the world, and my current preoccupation as an artist in Australia. The immediacy of drawing has allowed me to let the elements grow intuitively into metaphoric expressions,

which connect personal and geographical landscape, while the time consuming process of layering oil paint has become a dialogue with art works of past artists.

In this exhibition the paintings are a dialogue with Matisse's work. At times the composition and the title make clear the connection, as in 'after the dance', 'a game of balls', and 'intermission'. In other instances only the title is the connecting link, and the visual connection is extremely loose, as in 'bathers with a frog' and 'la coiffure'. Instead of human figures I have used dolls, and my painting method is diametrically opposed to Matisse's technique.

My writing is about the process of making the work. It is not about interpretation or meaning, which comes along later. My intention is that each image will evoke in the viewers a series of associations, ideas and aesthetic appreciation, which will be relevant to their experiences.

*

Between you and me, when I look at my artworks and speculate about them, they baffle me too.

Love hanna

*

Dear Hanna

...last night I actually managed to see your new work, on the internet. Initially I thought you were addressing him [Matisse] loosely, obliquely, as a reference rather than a quotation. But that analysis didn't satisfy me...

...when looking at 'Still Life' I thought, ha, here is the key. It is a very beautiful work. Very simple. Very difficult. I could even imagine the floating doll, light suffused, as a formaldehyde foetus. A psychological shock, in its ambiguity.

What is the core in Matisse?
His emphasis on jouissance. A reverence for life in its joyous realization. He wanted to make an art that sang out. He did, and in the process changed art as we knew it, before him.

Where does your work pick this up?
In opposition.
I think of ECHOES as an Oppositional Dialogue with Matisse, in the places where it connects with him.

How?
Well, his figures, when dancing, are immediate, rough, life-filled (not stilled). Your dolls are very considered, leave gaps in their touch, come, some of them without sight, without wigs, without playable instruments, without the voice of song... the opposition of music and dance.

And colour?
Matisse made urgent, saturated, wild colour. He got the light fast. Fauve. Your light comes deeply considered.
Slowly slowly, you build up layers of texture, of mark, of grace-paint (ie. Glazes) until at the top you arrive at this quite beautiful luminosity. It is not wild and sudden, it is the Opposite...

I want to add another thought. Perhaps the less threatening of the dolls are playing with Matisse after all. Getting a little closer, through a doll vocabulary, to the notion of play. Either way, what comes through is that there is an ambiguity in the work. Making creative tension and strength….

Much love, Heather

I enjoy interacting with the people in the community. Most seem so sensible. They work hard, enjoy their beer and volunteer to the bush fire brigade. When

they ask questions about my work, I can sense the hesitation. They are not sure they are asking the correct question.

Once a neighbouring farmer, who had come to check on his pump next to the river, came next to the fence and asked what I was renovating. I said that I was converting the stable to be my studio. He was amazed – why would one need so much space for painting? I said if things would get tough, I could turn it into a hall for dancing. He considered it and asked - how could things get tough when one paints? I started telling him about the times I could not paint; about the challenges I would invent and than would struggle to meet; about the meaningless and the rapture, but I stopped. I could see the bewilderment in his eyes.

Instead I said that at times it was difficult to make a living by selling artwork. He asked, “so why do you paint?” I wanted to tell him that I ask myself the very same question at least twice a week. I could have told him that I simply like the actual process of applying paint to canvas; that I like the smells of oil paint; that I like to see how a collection of black lines comes together to create light. Instead I said, smiling, that it is the only profession I had. The look he gave me was the look of somebody not sure whether or not he was told a joke. I took the opportunity to talk about pumps and horses. It was his territory. He became animated. He regained his poise. When he left I kept looking at him, wishing for his level-headedness.

*

I like watching people when they enter my studio. The transformation of the shed draws exclamations of wonder and an array of superlatives. Some knew it in its days of glory as a stable, and are astounded by the unexpected lightness of the heavy structure. They would walk from painting to painting. Looking closely at

details. Holding back from touching the surfaces. When looking at the dolls, the question on everyone's lips was why, the hell, did she paint these images?

I cannot explain why I have urges to paint certain things. When viewing the 'dolls' paintings, most people opt for the easy explanation – my personal biography. But with Rudolf Arnheim, I strongly believe that:

… psychological aspects of an artist's personality should not be called on for the interpretation of his work unless they introduce dimensions in keeping with the spiritual level at which the work itself conceived

I do feel that there are correct and incorrect interpretations of my work. When I showed the 'dolls' series, a woman, who had bought several of my early works said to me "I love your work, but this I hate. What kind of childhood did you have?" I did not create biographical images. Yes, I drew on personal experiences, but the work itself was an invitation to play games of the imagination. So I think the woman's reading was incorrect. Perhaps she could have said: "I am making association to children's world, and they are not very pleasant."

When I exhibited the "shadows" series, I was told by some viewers that the work was frightening, because the shadows I had painted were of my Israeli past. When I chose to introduce shadows into my work, it was for two conscious reasons. One, they enabled me to introduce into the canvas an action which was taking place outside the frame. Two, I could have the human body interact with the landscape. Perhaps the reading of my work could have been: "your artworks remind us of conflicts in Israel, and we find them spooky".

From my point of view, these responses would have been the correct ones. The associations the viewers made were as a result of their own references, which were not necessarily mine.

If the ‘dolls’ were disturbing, the ‘way of water’ is the embodiment of tranquillity. Today, I watched again people entering the studio. There were sighs of relief around.

9.

Even though the studio’s windows can present alluring disruption, I consider myself extremely fortunate to be able to work surrounded by nature, to walk among the blooming trees covered with busy bees. To be able to let my eyes relax on the landscape and let it flow into my limbs.

In the beginning of spring, a wagtail built her nest in the apple tree. I was at the easel, when my eyes caught a slight movement outside. A bird was hovering, holding a piece of straw in the tip of her beak, until she carefully placed it in the half built nest on a solid branch. She flew away, and several minutes later she was back with some white stuff that might have been a spider web. For a long time she returned again and again with assortments of fine straw, spider webs, bark, and short blades of grass. When she was satisfied with her creation, she sat down on top of the little stack, wiggled her wings and belly to give it shape. Next she inspected her creation from all sides, and flew away to bring soft chicken feathers and crushed dry leaves to place inside her newly constructed habitat. Now, there are 3 chicks in the nest, waiting with open mouth for her to feed them.

*

I was sitting on a rocky ledge beneath a willow tree. The ledge itself was immersed in the cool stream. It is my favourite spot on days when I worry the

mercury will escape the glass tube that contains it. Hidden behind the weeping branches, I would watch the gentle flow of the water. I heard a Platypus was living around this area of the river. I tried to penetrate the dark water with my gaze. I was determined to spot the mysterious creature. Never mind that it is a nocturnal mammal. It is just the spot it would have used as a shelter. It could burrow under the ledge and have plenty of frogs, fish, and insects on which to feed. Instead, I saw a family of large turtles, which was some compensation.

A breeze made the leaves catch the light and shimmer in the shadows beneath the tree. They speckled the water in a different way every moment. All of a sudden cumulus clouds covered the sun and the sky opened, drenching everything. It was the sound of rain that I heard first. The sound of the large drops hitting leaves, stones and water. My tranquil spot was transformed in a matter of seconds into a cacophony of smells, sounds and wild patterns. Calmness returned as suddenly as it was interrupted. Where I was sitting drops kept sliding off the leaves, slower and slower, changing the music and the ripples they made.

On the way back home I looked at the patterns the large drops painted on the dry stones. Which is the true colour of a stone – saturated with rain or bleached by sun?

Outside, the night air is full with insects and their predators. I would have loved to have sees fireflies among the chaotic traffic. A fleet of Xmas beetles – or June bugs as I knew them in America – was knocking on the window of my ‘thinking room’. They made an insisting thumping sound with their heavy, brown, shielded body, and disrupted the chain of my thought….

I never had an answer to the question how do I know a painting is finished. Now I know. A work is finished when I don’t want to let it go of it; when I feel it is finished yet I don’t want to stop working on it.

Moment – Wislawa Szymborska

I walk on the slope of a hill gone green
Grass, little flowers in the grass,
as in children's illustration.
The misty sky's already turning blue.
A view of other hills unfolds in silence.

As if there'd never been any Cambrians, Silurians,
rocks snarling at crags,
upturned abysses'
no nights in flames
and days in clouds of darkness.

As if plains hadn't pushed their way here
in malignant fevers,
icy shivers.

As if seas had seethed only elsewhere,
shredding the shores of the horizons.

It's nine-thirty local time.
Everything's in its place and in polite agreement.
In the valley a little brook cast as a little brook.
A path in the role of a path from always to ever.
Woods disguised as woods alive without end,
and above them birds in flight play birds in flight.

This moment reigns as far as the eye can reach.
One of those earthly moments
invited to linger.